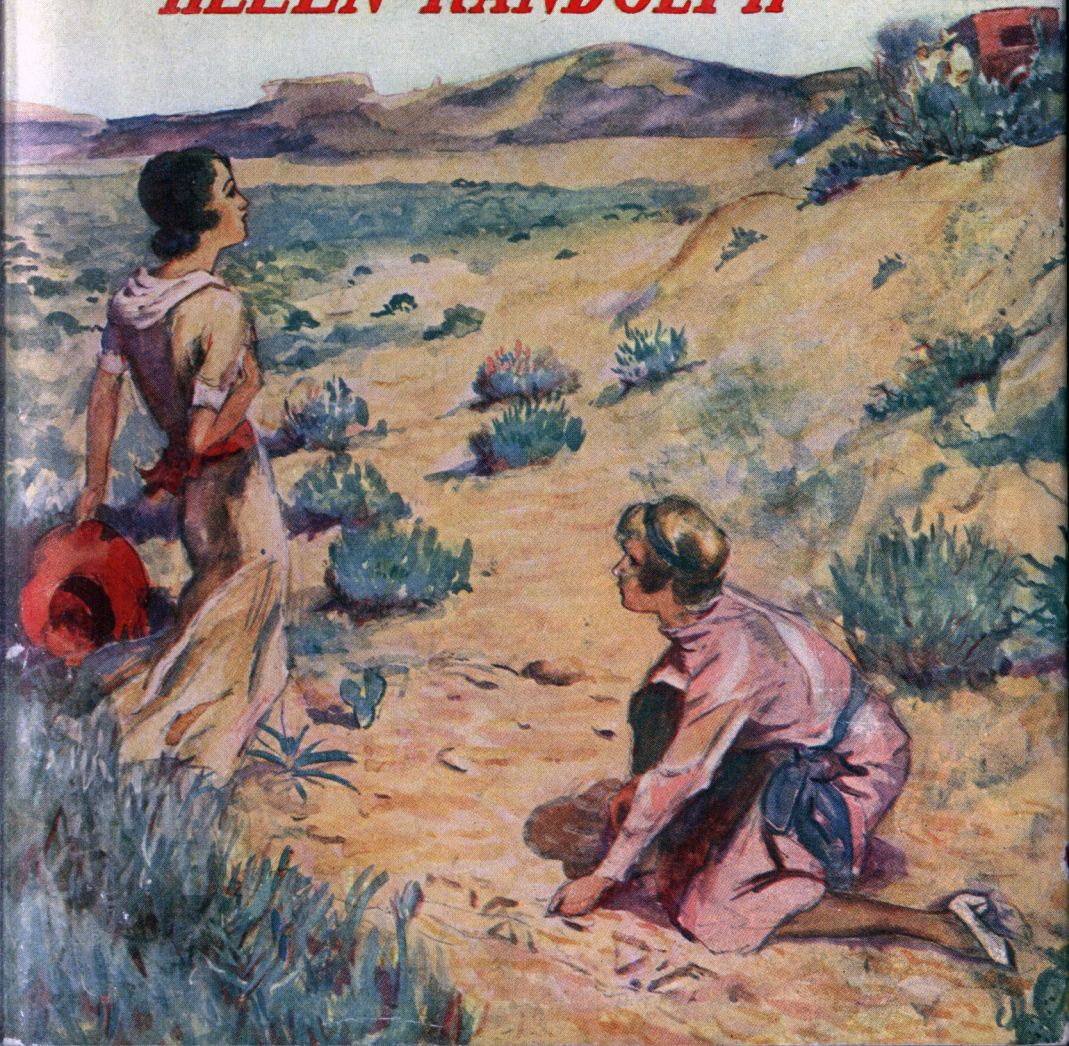
Crossed Trails IN MEXICO

HELEN RANDOLPH



CROSSED TRAILS IN MEXICO

By Helen Randolph

Jo Ann's love of adventure involves her and two school chums in a series of thrilling events in mysterious old Mexico.

In "Jitters," their rattly old car, Jo Ann and Peggy and Florence are driving through Mexico. With them are Carlitos and his aunt. The party happens on a band of smugglers who are terrorizing the natives and underpaying them for their workmanship.

The girls expose themselves to many risks, and are trapped in a mine while attempting to capture the smugglers. Their anxiety is increased when the desperadoes threaten the life of a revenue officer who is trying to prevent the smugglers from taking their contraband goods across the border into Texas.

A wild race over narrow mountain roads, with "Jitters" and the girls trying to outdistance the car of the smugglers, brings this mystery story to a thrilling climax.

Books in This Series

The Secret of Casa Grande
The Mystery of Carlitos
Crossed Trails in Mexico

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CROSSED TRAILS IN MEXICO

HELEN RANDOLPH

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CHAPTER I

"I'M AFRAID I'M GOING TO LOSE MY LIFE"

PEGGY NUDGED JO ANN and pointed to the sign ahead: "Speed limit, 80 miles."

Jo Ann's dark brown eyes twinkled. "It's plain to see we're out in the Texas open now—the wide open."

"Too bad poor old Jitters can't accept the invitation to do eighty. She's doing well when she makes forty or fifty. But even if she could go faster, Florence wouldn't let her." Peggy gestured toward the small, trim, fair-haired girl at the wheel.

"Florence has lived in Mexico so long that she's slow but sure like the Mexicans. She's always saying, 'Why the great rush? There's plenty of time!' If I were driving, now—" Jo Ann nodded her mop of unruly black curls vigor-

ously—"I'd encourage Jitters to go her limit, especially since she has brand-new tires."

"Here too. Weren't we lucky to find such a bargain in a car? I'll admit she's not much on looks and that she shakes till she deserves the name of Jitters—but she's ours, all ours." Peggy's hazel eyes gazed admiringly upon their old battered Ford.

"And look where she's carrying us: to Mexico! All the way to the land of mystery and romance!"

"I can hardly wait to get back down there again. I wonder if we'll run into as thrilling adventures as we did last summer when we were visiting Florence."

Peggy smiled. "You will. You're always getting out of one mystery only to tumble headlong into another."

Jo Ann nodded toward the prim, erect, gray-haired woman on the front seat beside Florence and murmured, "Miss Prudence 'll keep me on my good behavior this time. Even if some

tremendous mystery bumps right into me this trip, I'm not going to pay one bit of attention to it."

"Straight from Missouri am I," Peggy replied, laughing.

"From Mississippi, you mean. From a year's hard work in good old Evanston High. The work's agreed with us, hasn't it? We're both four or five pounds heavier. School's agreed with Carlitos, too." Jo Ann leaned forward to smile at the round-faced eleven-year-old boy sitting on the other side of Peggy. "He's as fat as a butter ball now."

Ever since the five had started on their long automobile journey, Carlitos had been too busy viewing the scenery to talk, but at Jo Ann's words he opened his blue eyes wide and asked in broken English, "Butter ball—what is dat?"

Both Jo Ann and Peggy exchanged smiles. It seemed strange to them that Carlitos could not understand the most commonplace phrases, yet when they stopped to think that he had spoken

Spanish altogether till he had come to the States last fall, they marveled that he talked as well as he did.

While Jo Ann was explaining to him the meaning of the words "butter ball," Peggy was mentally reviewing his strange life. When he was about a year old his parents had come from New Jersey to a remote Mexican village where his father, Charles Eldridge, owned a silver mine. A few months later Mr. Eldridge had met his death at the hands of a treacherous Mexican foreman, and shortly afterwards Mrs. Eldridge had died from the combined effects of shock and pneumonia, leaving the tiny Carlitos in the care of a poor ignorant Indian nurse. The foreman, who had taken possession of the mine, then tried to kidnap Carlitos, the rightful heir. Alarmed at this threatened danger, the nurse had fled across the mountains with Carlitos and her family where they were befriended by Jo Ann, Florence, and herself. Due to their efforts Carlitos's uncle, Edward Eldridge, had been found

and the mine restored to Carlitos. So dismayed had his uncle been at finding that his nephew could not speak English that he had sent him to Massachusetts to live with his aunt, Miss Prudence Eldridge.

Peggy smiled to herself as her thoughts wandered around to the New England spinster aunt who had come down by train with Carlitos to Mississippi and was accompanying them the rest of the way to Mexico. Miss Prudence's never-ceasing astonishment at having a half-grown nephew who was just learning to speak English was a source of amusement to her and Florence and Jo Ann.

Just then Carlitos broke into an excited exclamation: "We come to big city! See—big high houses!"

"Fine!" Jo Ann ejaculated. "That must be Houston. We've made much better time than I thought. We'll be there by seven o'clock."

With a broad smile Peggy remarked low-voiced to Jo Ann, "Don't forget that you drew

Miss Prudence for your roommate tonight. I heard her say she always rises at five-thirty, so I see where you'll have to get up with the chickens."

"If I have to get up at that ghastly hour, I'll wake you and Florence, too. It 'll be specially good for you to get up early. As Miss Prudence said last night, 'Remember, the early bird catches the worm'!"

Peggy made a funny little grimace. "But I don't want to catch worms—I don't like 'em."

"You'll have to acquire a taste for them then," Jo Ann retorted between giggles. A moment later she added, "We really ought to get an early start tomorrow morning, sure enough, since we may go by way of Brownsville."

On reaching the city a half hour later, they drove straight to one of the larger hotels.

"I just adore going into strange hotels," remarked Peggy, starting to get out of the car.

Miss Prudence turned in time to see her rising and said quickly, "You girls wait here while I go

in and look around. One can't be too particular about the kind of hotel one chooses, even to stay for a few hours."

Disappointed, Peggy dropped back into her seat.

"Never mind, Peg, when we get to Mexico she'll let Florence and us take the lead, since she's never been there before."

In a few minutes the girls saw Miss Prudence returning, followed closely by a porter.

"Come on," she called out briskly to them. "I've registered for us all."

She hurried them on inside the hotel and into the elevator so rapidly that Peggy declared afterwards that she wouldn't have known she was in a hotel if she hadn't seen a bellboy.

When the porter stopped at the first room and asked which baggage he was to carry in, Miss Prudence pointed to her suitcase, then hesitated a half second.

Peggy grasped this opportunity to put in, "Jo says she's going to be your roommate this time."

Miss Prudence smiled over at Jo Ann. "Fine. Carlitos's room connects with ours; then you and Florence have the one next to his. All of you hurry and get cleaned up, now, so we can get something to eat right away. Then we'll come straight up and go to bed. We have to get an early start in the morning, you know."

The three girls exchanged swift glances but did not protest.

Once inside their room, however, Peggy groaned loudly to Florence, "Miss Prudence acts as if we were still in rompers. Putting us to bed as soon as we've eaten our suppers! What's the fun of coming to a new city if you can't see anything?"

By nine o'clock, still inwardly protesting but outwardly calm, the girls were marshaled back to their rooms by Miss Prudence.

Jo Ann bade Peggy and Florence good night and remarked with a teasing smile, "You'll hear me knocking at your door about 5:30 A. M."

"Don't you dare!" both girls exclaimed in the same breath. Florence added, "Surely you wouldn't be that cruel!"

"Oh yes, I would. Misery needs companionship. Be sure to leave the sliding panel of your door down as it is now, so you can hear my first tap." Jo Ann indicated the top section of the door which was screened by a Venetian blind, as were the doors of all the other rooms.

It seemed to Jo Ann she had hardly been asleep two winks that night when she heard a voice saying in her ear, "Sorry, my dear, but it's time you're getting up."

Miss Prudence! Surely it couldn't be morning! She suppressed a groan and turned over for another nap, only to hear the insistent voice: "Sorry, my dear, but——"

Jo Ann managed to mumble a sleepy "All right."

After much stretching and yawning she reluctantly slipped out of bed. She stood blinking sleepily at Miss Prudence in her blue kimono

and thinking how Chinesey she looked wi her long, gray, braided pigtail down h back.

Miss Prudence's next words were anything b Chinese: "Call the girls and Carlitos before y start to dress. Both Peggy and Florence a slower than you, and it 'll take them a long tin to get ready."

"Some of my clothes are in Peg's bag, so I have to go in and get them before I can dre I'll wake them then." Thoroughly roused last, Jo Ann thrust her feet into her slippe slipped into her negligee, and started down t hall.

Just as she reached the girls' door a man earnest voice sounded startlingly clear throu the screened panel of the door directly across t hall. Her heart gave a sudden frightened le at hearing someone say, "I'm afraid I'm going lose my life before this is over."

So distinct were the words that it seemed as the man were talking to her. In danger of losi

his life! And he was! There was no mistaking the conviction in his voice. It was not the broken trembling voice of a coward. It had been firm, strong, even though he was sure he was in grave danger. He must be talking to someone over the phone—there was no audible answer. Why was he in such terrible trouble? What had he done? Was he a criminal or a detective?

Standing statue-like at the girls' door Jo Ann listened intently for his next words. "I was hot on their trail," the voice went on, "but had two flats, and that delayed me. . . . Yes, in the usual place."

Before she could realize that the conversation had ended, the door opened suddenly, and a tall, stalwart man wearing a broad-brimmed tan felt hat stepped out. On seeing Jo Ann he halted and shot a piercing glance at her from gray eyes so penetratingly keen that she felt as if they were cutting straight through her.

She flushed with embarrassment. It had been unpardonably rude to eavesdrop that way. What

must that man think of her? Hurriedly she began knocking on the girls' door.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw that the man, after hesitating a fraction of a second, had gone on down the hall toward the elevator.

CHAPTER II

THE MYSTERY MAN

AFTER SHE HAD KNOCKED several times, Peggy called out sleepily, "Who's that?"

"Open the door. Hurry!"

"All right—I'll be there—in a jiffy."

In a few moments Peggy flung the door open, and Jo Ann stepped inside, her eyes still dilated with excitement.

"I've just heard the strangest—most mysterious thing!" she gasped.

"You would!" Peggy declared. "But that's nothing unusual for you. You're always hearing and seeing mysterious things."

"What was it?" Florence called from the bed.

"Well, just as I had reached your door and was about to knock, I heard a man in the room directly across the hall say in the most earnest

voice imaginable, 'I'm afraid I'm going to lose my life before this is over.' "

Both girls stared wide-eyed at Jo Ann; then Peggy, recovering from her first shock, asked half doubtfully, "You're sure you didn't misunderstand him? Your imagination runs riot now and then. Perhaps you just thought you heard him say that."

Jo Ann shook her head vigorously. "No imagination about it. I heard him as distinctly as I do you now."

"What on earth made him say that, do you suppose, Jo?" Florence asked curiously.

"That's what I'd like to know."

"What *can* that man be—a gangster?" Without waiting for an answer Peggy added, shuddering, "The idea of that man's being right across the hall from us gives me the creeps." She flew back to the door to see if she had locked it.

"I believe he must be a detective; I feel sure he wasn't a gangster," Jo Ann said quickly. "He didn't look like one."

"You saw him!" both girls exclaimed together.

"Yes, he came out of his door suddenly and caught me standing there listening. I hadn't any business eavesdropping—but I just couldn't help it. I wanted to know why he thought he was going to lose his life."

"Did you hear him say anything else?" queried Peggy in a whisper, glancing back toward the door as if she thought the man might be doing some eavesdropping himself.

"Not very much. Evidently he was talking to someone over the phone. I couldn't hear anyone answering. He said that he'd lost the trail because he'd been delayed on account of two flat tires."

"Lost the trail!" Florence repeated. "That sounds as if he's a detective, sure enough. Whom do you suppose he was after?"

"That's hard to say. I'd have to use my imagination to answer that."

"You've certainly run into a real mystery this time," put in Peggy, now thoroughly convinced

that Jo Ann's tale was not fiction. "You ought to have thought up some kind of a solution by——"

A sharp knock at the door broke into Peggy's sentence, and all three girls gave little surprised jumps and stared at the door without saying a word.

The next instant Miss Prudence's voice called out crisply, "Girls!"

"Oh, it's just Miss Prudence!" Peggy exclaimed in relief. "I thought maybe that man . . ." She left her sentence unfinished and ran to the door.

Jo Ann's face reddened guiltily. She had forgotten entirely about dressing and telling the girls to hurry.

As soon as Miss Prudence stepped inside and saw that the girls were still in their pajamas, she looked over reproachfully at Jo Ann and said, "I thought you'd all be almost dressed by this time."

"We would 've been ready, but . . ." Jo Ann rushed into an account of the strange telephone

conversation she had heard, ending apologetically, "I was so excited that I forgot all about our having to dress."

As soon as Jo Ann had finished, Miss Prudence spoke up quickly, "The sooner we get out of this hotel the better. I don't like the idea of being in a room across from a man that's expecting to get killed any instant. Hurry fast as you can and get dressed."

"The man's not in his room now: I saw him go down the hall toward the elevator," Jo Ann reminded her.

"But he might come back any minute, and there might—well, something might happen. Hurry, girls."

Thus urged, the girls dressed hastily. Even Peggy, who usually was deliberate about arranging her auburn hair into neat waves, speeded up this part of her toilet and was dressed in record-breaking time.

After they had been joined by Carlitos they all went down to the coffee room for their break-

fast and then on out to the garage to get the car.

Jo Ann slipped into the front seat of the car saying, "It's my turn to drive Jitters this morning."

"I'll sit with you to see that you don't go too fast," Florence remarked smilingly, dropping down beside her.

Jo Ann laughed. "It's Jitters herself that 'll keep me from exceeding the speed limit."

After they had left the city and had gone several miles, Jo Ann noticed that in the automobile just ahead of them were three men, one wearing a uniform and the other two in civilian clothes and large felt hats similar to the one the mystery man had worn. "The biggest one of those men in that car ahead looks exactly like the man I overheard talking this morning," she remarked to Florence. "He's the same size and is wearing the same kind of hat."

Florence smiled. "It seems to me most of the men I've seen so far in Texas are big and wear that kind of hat. You have that mystery man on

your mind: that's why you think you see a resemblance."

"Maybe so, but I believe it's that very man."

"It's possible that it is he, but"—Florence smiled—"I'm more interested in that man in the uniform. I believe he's a traffic cop and is going to get you for speeding."

"Look at that sign!" Jo Ann pointed to another road sign indicating that the speed limit was 80 miles. "And now look at the speedometer. I'm going to let Jitters do her best now and pass that car. I want to get a good look at that man and see if it is my mystery man. I'll feel relieved to know he's still alive."

Jo Ann stepped on the gas and soon was swinging out to the side of the road. As she passed by the other car, she threw a swift but keen glance at the largest one of the men.

"That *is* the mystery man!" she exclaimed a moment later. "I'm sure it's he. I certainly am glad he's still alive."

Florence relayed Jo Ann's words to Peggy,

whereupon Peggy craned her neck to stare out of the rear window at the occupants of the car. "Where do you suppose they're going—to Mexico?" she asked Florence a moment later.

Florence shook her head. "Ask me an easy question. That's too hard for me."

"I wish I knew more about him. I wonder why he's in such terrible trouble. I hope he's going the same route we are."

"It's high time we're deciding whether we're going by way of Brownsville or Laredo," Florence called back, hoping that Miss Prudence would catch the anxious note in her voice. She and the other two girls had hinted very strongly to her that they would like to take the longer route, by way of Brownsville, so they could see Lucile Owen, one of their schoolmates, but Miss Prudence had so far refused to say definitely whether she would be willing.

"I'd love to see Lucile," Jo Ann put in, loud enough for Miss Prudence to hear, and adding also for her special benefit, "She says no one

really knows Texas till he's seen the Rio Grande valley and its citrus groves."

"It's the most famous garden spot of Texas," added Peggy.

The girls could see that Miss Prudence was favorably impressed, but she still hesitated to give her approval, saying, "It's so far out of our way—four hundred miles at least."

"I believe if we keep singing the valley's praises she'll give her consent," Florence prophesied, low-voiced, to Jo Ann.

"Whichever way we go, I hope the mystery man goes the same way," Jo Ann replied. "I want to find out more about him. Is his car still following?"

Florence turned around to see, then reported, "Yes, just a short distance behind."

Several times afterwards Jo Ann asked that same question, to have it answered each time in the affirmative.

By about two o'clock she decided that they must be nearing the road turning off to Browns-

ville. "Miss Prudence 'll have to decide very shortly now which way we're going," she told Florence.

Evidently Peggy was thinking the same thing, as the next moment they heard her appealing again to Miss Prudence to decide on that route. While Miss Prudence was still wavering about her decision, Jo Ann drove past the Brownsville road, but stopped as soon as Florence told her she had seen the sign. "We've got to decide right now," she ended.

CHAPTER III

THE HITCH-HIKER

JUST AS FLORENCE was speaking, she and Jo Ann saw the car that had been following whiz by them with only the two men in civilian clothes in it.

"Oh, there goes the mystery man!" Jo Ann exclaimed. "He's going the Laredo road. I wish I could follow and see if anything happens to him."

Miss Prudence spoke up quickly: "We're not going to follow anybody who's expecting to be murdered any minute. We'd better go the Brownsville road. Back to that filling station and ask if the road's good."

Jo Ann obediently backed the car to the filling station, though a queer feeling now possessed her that she ought to have kept on the Laredo

road. "I can't help feeling as worried over that man as if I'd known him for a long time," she told herself. "I wonder if I'll ever see him again."

By this time Miss Prudence was talking to the service-station man about the road.

"I think the road's okay, but"—he nodded toward a man in uniform—"he'll know. He's a coast guard and goes back and forth often that way. He's waiting to catch a ride to Brownsville now."

Miss Prudence inspected the tall blond young man closely, then remarked low-voiced, "It might be a good idea to have him go with us: coast guards are used to protecting people."

"I hope she asks him to ride with us," Jo Ann whispered to Florence. "He might know about the mystery man, since he's been riding in the car with him."

The next moment Miss Prudence gestured to the coast guard, who promptly hurried over to the car and in answer to her questions began

praising the road and the beauty of the valley.

"Californians could learn how to boost higher and better from him," Jo Ann thought, smiling. "Miss Prudence 'll be sure to go now."

She was right. Miss Prudence promptly decided to go to Brownsville and asked the coast guard to accompany them. To make room for him on the front seat, she ordered Carlitos and Florence to exchange places.

"You're the sandwich filling now," Jo Ann laughingly told Carlitos, as he slipped in beside her.

Carlitos smiled doubtfully. From the expression on her face he knew she must be joking, but he could not understand the point.

After she had explained it to him, she told the curious coast guard briefly how it was that Carlitos, though an American by birth, was just beginning to speak English. The guard, proud of his newly learned Spanish, began talking in that language to Carlitos, much to his joy and to Miss Prudence's disapproval.

At the first break in their conversation Jo Ann quickly recounted to the guard the strange telephone conversation she had overheard in the hotel and ended tentatively, "I believe that man I overheard was one of those men whose car you were in."

"You're probably right," the guard replied. "I'd never seen either of those men before they picked me up, but they told me they'd been chasing some smugglers who'd been bringing in dope and gold across the Mexican border. I shouldn't like to be in those men's shoes. Those smugglers belong to a desperate gang who 're as cold-blooded as snakes. They'd as soon kill anyone as not."

"With as many officers as we have, it looks as if they could stop that smuggling," Jo Ann replied.

The guard shook his head. "Easier said than done. When we get to Brownsville, I'll show you just one of the smugglers' many tricks—how some of the boldest bring dope and gold

across the bridge there, closely guarded as it is. Smugglers have whole bags of such tricks."

"Be sure to show us that. It 'll be interesting to find out first hand about smugglers."

Though it was dark when they reached Brownsville, Jo Ann reminded the guard of his promise as he was about to get out of the car near the International Bridge.

"Sure, I'll show you if you want to see," he answered. "It's black as pitch under the bridge now, and you'll get a better idea of how the smuggling's done."

Jo Ann turned to Miss Prudence and rapidly explained that the guard was going to show them how some of the smuggling was carried on across the border.

Miss Prudence raised her eyebrows in disapproval. "I hardly think you girls need any information along such lines. Of course, it's probably a little interesting—in a way—to see how smuggling could be carried on right under our custom officials' noses, but——"

Jo Ann smiled to herself. Miss Prudence was as curious to know about smuggling methods as she was. "She'll consent—after she objects a while."

Jo Ann was right. Finally, after protesting a few more minutes, Miss Prudence gave her permission, and all five followed the guard below the bridge. Blinded by the sudden change from the lighted street, they stumbled along in the darkness, half terrified at their daring.

"The river's very low now," the guard explained. "Anyone can manage to crawl down the bank and get out a long way under the bridge and hide. Just before the smuggler, coming from the Mexican side, nears the appointed place, he whistles his signal to his confederate waiting under the bridge, then tosses his package over the railing to him."

"There might be some of those smugglers here this very instant," Miss Prudence whispered nervously. "Let's go back."

"They might think we're spying on them and shoot us," added Peggy.

Jo Ann heard the amused note in the guard's voice as he answered, "There won't be any smuggling going on this early in the evening."

"But it's pitch dark," Miss Prudence put in.

"And terribly scary," added Florence, grabbing Jo Ann by the arm. "Come on."

Even though Jo Ann was reluctant to leave this fascinating spot, she too felt more comfortable when they climbed back up the bank and out on the lighted sidewalk again. Her thoughts centered once more on the mystery man whose work kept his life endangered by smugglers.

"I hope he breaks up that gang of smugglers without losing his life," she told herself.

After they had said good-by to the coast guard, they went to the nearest hotel.

"The first thing we've got to do now," Jo Ann said while they were being whisked up in the elevator, "is to phone Lucile and tell her we're here."

"She'll be sure to invite us to her house to dinner tonight," put in Peggy, her eyes shining with anticipation.

"Won't it be nice to be together again?" added Florence.

As soon as Jo Ann had succeeded in getting Lucile on the telephone, Peggy and Florence listened eagerly to the one-sided conversation and tried to guess the other side.

Lucile's eager voice came back quickly in answer to Jo Ann with an invitation for all five to spend the night at her home. "You've arrived at the right moment," she went on. "Edna is visiting me and I'm having a little dinner party for her tonight."

Jo Ann refused the first part of the invitation, explaining that they had already secured their rooms at the hotel. "We'll be delighted to come to your dinner party, though," she added.

Miss Prudence broke in quickly with an emphatic, "Tell her it 'll be impossible for me and Carlitos to come. I'm too tired to go another step

anywhere. If they'll come after you girls and bring you back, it 'll be all right for you to go without me."

Jo Ann relayed this message to Lucile, ending, "We'll be ready when you get here."

CHAPTER IV

PRESSING DIFFICULTIES

AFTER JO ANN had finished talking to Lucile, Florence and Peggy asked together, "Is it a real party she's having? Will we have to dress up?"

"Yes, we'll have to wear dinner dresses, of course. We'll have to speed, too, if we're to be ready when she gets here."

"Oh, I'm afraid my blue crêpe 'll be a mass of wrinkles" Peggy exclaimed as she hurried over and began unpacking her clothes.

"Get my dress—the pink taffeta—out, too," Jo Ann called out on her way to the bathroom. "It's in your suitcase. I'll have my bath in two jiffies and be in my dress in another one."

When she reappeared in the room a few minutes later, garbed in a negligee whose rose color matched her fresh glowing cheeks, she found

that Miss Prudence and Carlitos had gone to the dining room and that Florence and Peggy were standing lamenting over the wrinkled state of their dinner dresses.

"Our dresses are terribly rumpled, and yours is the worst of the three," Peggy remarked with a worried frown. "I hate for us to disgrace Lucile by coming to her party looking like wrecks of the Hesperus."

"We won't have time to send them out to a pressing shop or even to the maid here in the hotel—we'd never get them back in time to wear," added Florence.

"Oh, stop worrying!" Jo Ann sang out, as she ran the comb through her curls. "I'll press all three dresses while you're getting your baths. You have a small electric iron in your bag, didn't you say, Florence?"

"Yes. It's really a toy that I'm taking as a present to one of the little girls in my neighborhood. The cord's so short—I doubt if you can use the iron."

"Get it out and I'll use it all right." Jo Ann's voice was confident.

When Florence handed the iron to her and she saw how short the cord was, she began to feel dubious, though her determination did not waver. She'd manage some way. After a hasty look about the room she saw there was only one usable light socket in the room—the high ceiling one above the bed.

"I'll have to attach the iron to that socket." She pointed to the ceiling light.

Florence looked at the diminutive cord and laughed. "You can't do it."

"If you'll hold me steady, you'll see." Jo Ann climbed up on the foot of the bed. "Hold my legs, now." She stood tiptoe on this perch and after many efforts succeeded in putting the plug into one of the center sockets.

That done, she stepped down on a newspaper on the bed, but to her disappointment she saw that the cord lacked at least four feet.

Peggy and Florence burst into giggles at the

funny sight of Jo Ann holding the iron in mid-air.

"Stop giggling, sillies, and do something, quick. This iron's getting hot, and I'm getting tired holding it. Get that table over there and put it up here on the bed. Hurry!"

The two girls rushed over to the table, jerked off the water pitcher and glasses, and then carried it over and lifted it on top of the bed. The iron still hung at least two feet above the table.

"Oh gee!" wailed Jo Ann. "Get something else to put on top of the table. Step on it! Don't run around in circles like a puppy after its tail, Peg."

"Thanks for the beautiful comparison," Peggy grinned. "You're equally funny looking yourself, springing up and down on that bed every time you move."

"Can't help springing. It's the springiest bed in all Texas."

By that time Florence had brought over the low luggage stool and placed it on top of the

table. But even with its added height there were several inches between it and the iron.

"There's nothing else to put on top of that—except the dresser," called out Peggy between giggles. "Oh yes, maybe the telephone book 'll help." She ran over with it and several magazines and piled them on top of the luggage stand.

"Attaboy!" Jo Ann ejaculated triumphantly as she set the iron down on the magazines. "Now bring me something for an ironing-board cover and the dresses."

In a few more minutes she was ironing away energetically, swaying back and forth in her efforts to keep her balance on the springy bed. "Stop staring at me and giggling and get dressed, you sillies. What's so funny now?"

"I was just wondering what the manager 'd say if he'd come in and catch you ironing," grinned Peggy. "It's against the rules to iron in a room—at least, it is in all the hotels I've ever heard of."

Jo Ann flushed guiltily. Noticing that the sliding wood panel of the door was down and that someone might be able to peer between the slats of the blinds at the screened top, she implored Peggy to slide the panel up. Peggy obediently pushed the panel up as commanded, but no sooner had she turned away than it slipped down with a crash like a pistol shot.

Both girls jumped in alarm, and Jo Ann almost tumbled off the bed.

"Now we're in for it!" Jo Ann gasped. "Someone 'll think we're shooting in here and will come to investigate. Shove that panel up again —quick. Push a chair against it to hold it in place."

After a few minutes had passed and no one had come to investigate, Jo Ann breathed more freely. Just as she was complimenting herself on coming to the finishing touches of her pressing, there came a sudden knocking at the door. Jo Ann was petrified. Was it the manager? She

shook her head vigorously at Peggy, who was starting to open the door.

The next moment the door was rattled violently. Simultaneously the panel banged down again.

From the hall there sounded a woman's shrill voice.

"Miss Prudence!" the girls gasped.

"Open the door this instant, Peg, and get her inside before someone else comes," Jo Ann ordered.

The moment Miss Prudence stepped inside and saw Jo Ann perched on top of the bed, ironing, she stared in amazement. As soon as she had recovered from her first surprise, she burst out, "What does this mean? Don't you know it's against the rules to iron in your room? I've never stayed in a hotel anywhere that allowed ironing in the rooms. We'll get in trouble yet—besides having to pay extra money. You'd better stop this instant."

"But I'm most through now," Jo Ann replied

meekly. "In a few minutes I'll have my dress finished."

"But just suppose the manager should knock on the door and catch you on top of the bed like this."

As Miss Prudence was still worrying when Florence had finished dressing, she decided to see for herself what the hotel rules said about ironing. She walked over and began glancing at the printed rules hanging on the wall by the telephone.

A few moments later she stopped reading and burst into peals of laughter. "Oh, girls!" she exclaimed after she had checked her mirth a little. "This is rich! Funniest thing I've ever heard. The rules say——" She stopped and broke into uncontrollable laughter again.

Peggy ran over to read the rule that was causing Florence so much amusement. Then she too began to laugh, stopping only long enough to exclaim, "Oh—this is killing!"

"What's the joke? What on earth does that say?" Jo Ann demanded.

Peggy checked her laughter long enough to answer, "It says when a guest—wishes to iron—to call the office, and ironing board—and iron 'll be sent up immediately.

Jo Ann's jaw dropped, as did Miss Prudence's. Their expressions were so ridiculous that Florence and Peggy continued laughing till the tears rolled down their cheeks.

After an amazed, "And to think I could 've had a real iron and board for the asking!" Jo Ann began laughing equally merrily.

They were all still smiling broadly several minutes later when they went down to the lobby to meet Lucile and her mother, who were waiting for them there.

The dinner party turned out to be a great success, and the girls did not return to the hotel till almost eleven o'clock.

"It's my turn to sleep with Miss Prudence," Peggy remarked on entering the other girls'

room, "but I'm scared to go in there and wake her up this late. She'd think it an unearthly hour." She stopped talking and smiled over at the girls. "Aren't you going to be polite and ask me to sleep with you? You'd better, because I'm going to, invitation or no invitation."

With a mock groan Jo Ann looked at the double bed and then at Peggy. "Say, Florence," she remarked finally, "I feel sorry for ourselves, don't you?"

"Put her in the middle where she can take the consequences," suggested Florence, her eyes twinkling.

Jo Ann grimaced. "The consequences 'll probably be that you and I'll be out on the floor before the night's over."

After much subdued giggling and chatter the three girls finally climbed into bed and drifted off to sleep.

About five o'clock the next morning they were aroused by someone knocking at the door.

Peggy waked with a start. "Someone knock-

ing! Maybe the hotel's afire and they're trying to rouse us!" darted through her mind.

She flung off the covers, tumbled over the sleeping Jo Ann, and rushed to the door to find an anxious-faced Miss Prudence.

"Thank goodness you're here, Peggy," Miss Prudence exclaimed. "I just woke up and found you weren't in my room, and I was so alarmed! Are the other girls here?" She snapped on the light and stood blinking at the frightened Florence and Jo Ann, who by this time were sitting up in bed, trying to figure out what had happened.

"Now that you're all awake you might as well dress, so we can get an early start," Miss Prudence announced crisply.

Jo Ann groaned audibly and sank back in the bed.

"Isn't it only about two or three o'clock?" Florence asked hesitatingly.

"Mercy, no! It's after five. It takes you girls

so long to dress that it 'll be six or half past before you'll be ready."

"Oh, but I'm so—so sleepy!" Peggy yawned. "Five o'clock's an awful hour to get up."

Miss Prudence eyed her severely. "You stayed up too late last night, probably. Just dash some cold water in your face—that 'll wake you." She added with a whimsical note in her voice, "Perhaps I'd better do it for you—and sprinkle some on Florence and Jo Ann, too."

"Oh, have a heart, Miss Prudence!" Jo Ann begged, burrowing her head under the covers.

Seeing that Miss Prudence was in earnest about the early start and was going to stay there to see that they did get up and dress, Florence and Jo Ann reluctantly slipped out of bed.

"When we reach the mine, I'm going to sleep and sleep to make up for all this lost time," Jo Ann murmured to the girls between yawns as she was dressing.

"Maybe you'll even sleep through the siesta hour—you couldn't learn that trick last summer,

it seemed," Peggy replied. "I take to sleeping the way Miss Prudence does to getting up with the chickens. Maybe the tropical heat 'll make her more sleepy-headed down there."

Florence smiled. "Here's hoping it will."

CHAPTER V

THE HIDDEN CAR

ONCE THEY WERE in the car and on their way, winding along the Rio Grande and breathing in the fresh, invigorating morning air, they felt better about having had to start so early.

"We'll make the city early this afternoon, at this rate," Peggy remarked. "That 'll give us time to do a little sightseeing. I wish we didn't have to go clear to Laredo before we cross the river. I'm eager to get on Mexican soil right away."

"That's the way with me," Jo Ann added. "I wish there were a short cut somewhere. It seems as if there ought to be."

When, two hours later, they stopped at a filling station in a little town to get some gas, and Jo Ann made this same remark to the service

man, he looked puzzled and merely nodded his head. Florence, realizing that he understood little English, began questioning him in Spanish.

All smiles on hearing his native language, he answered at once, "*Sí,* there is a bridge you can cross here. They are putting in a new highway across the desert, which joins the main highway from Laredo."

"*Bien.* I think we shall go that way," Florence replied. "It will save us much time, will it not?"

"*Sí*—a little. It is about a hundred kilometers less, that way."

Florence smiled. "That is very good." Now that she was so close to the country where her parents lived she was growing more and more eager to get home.

"That desert road doesn't sound good to me," Miss Prudence put in, shaking her gray head vigorously. "It's probably impassable. Ask him if it's any worse than this one. I certainly don't want to get stranded in the desert."

Florence obediently relayed her question.

"If there isn't any rain"—the man grinned and shrugged his shoulders—"you can drive through all right."

Florence translated to Miss Prudence what he had said and added, "The rainy season doesn't begin till September. We're not likely to have rain. Look at the sky!" She gestured to the cloudless expanse of blue above them.

"It's so dry and hot now it's hard to believe it ever rains in this forsaken country." Miss Prudence hesitated a moment, then went on, "If we'll save that much distance through this awful country, maybe we'd better try it."

"Grand!" ejaculated all three girls together.

"Ah, how good!" sang out Carlitos in Spanish.

While Miss Prudence was still pointing out the country's bad points, Jo Ann followed the man's directions and turned into the side road leading across the toll bridge. With little difficulty she steered the car down the narrow road, not stopping till they reached the bridge.

As soon as they had passed over the middle of the bridge, the girls and Carlitos, to Miss Prudence's evident disapproval, exclaimed joyously, "We're in Mexico now! *Viva* Mexico! *Viva* Mexico!"

As both Florence and Carlitos spoke Spanish fluently, it did not take them long to answer the questions asked by the customs officials on the Mexican side, and so they were soon permitted to drive on. They had not left the river far behind before the vegetation began to change again to the typical desert varieties, mesquite, chaparral, cacti—especially the prickly pear and many other thorn-bearing kinds.

Miss Prudence expressed her opinion by saying in a disgusted tone, "Desolation itself. I never saw so much land going to waste."

"But just think how fertile and productive the land is after it's irrigated," observed Florence.

Miss Prudence passed over Florence's comment without a word and went on to scold about the condition of the road. "And that man called

this a good road. I'd call it a series of gullies. It's practically impassable. If it should rain——"

"It won't, don't worry," comforted Florence.

On account of the many washed-out places in the road, Jo Ann found that she had to drive in low gear frequently. As a result the engine soon became overheated and steam began to pour out in jets from the radiator.

"Oh, gee!" she ejaculated. "I'll have to stop now and get some water and put it in the radiator." She drew her brows together into a frown. "Where 'll I get the water? We haven't a drop with us. Of all the tenderfeet, I'm the biggest and greenest."

"We'll have to drive all the way back to the river—or maybe we can find a water hole down toward the river. We might walk down that gully a piece and see." Florence pointed to the deep cut leading toward the river.

"All right." Jo Ann drew the car up to one side of the road and stopped.

"What's the matter?" Miss Prudence called out anxiously.

"Nothing except our radiator's thirsty. I'm going down here and see if I can find some water for it." She reached down and picked up a tin bucket off the floor. "Who wants to go with me?"

"I'll go," Florence replied.

After eying the thick thorny vegetation on all sides, Peggy shook her head. "Not I. I'd feel as if I were being electrocuted, walking through all those thorns and stickers."

As Jo Ann and Florence were picking their way gingerly along the rocky gully, Jo Ann exclaimed, "Why, look! Here 're some automobile tracks, and here's one that looks as if it 'd been made just recently. I can't imagine anyone's being able to get much farther down here."

"Nor I."

When they had gone several yards farther, Jo Ann noticed that the car tracks led up the sloping left side of the gully. All at once she spied a

car hidden behind some bushes up on the edge of the gully.

"Look, there's the car!" she exclaimed, low-voiced, pointing to it. "Up there behind that mesquite. Looks as if someone's tried to hide it there. Something queer about that—suspicious. I'd like to go up and peek inside it."

"Well, I for one am not going up to investigate." Florence caught Jo Ann by the hand and pulled her along as fast as she could through the maze of thorny plants. "You have entirely too much curiosity."

"It's enough to make anyone wonder, to find a car hidden in such a desolate spot. Maybe"—she whispered her next word—"smugglers 've hidden it there. I'm going up and——"

"Oh, please don't—please——" Florence tugged at Jo Ann's arm, but in vain.

Jo Ann turned back and started up the slope.

"Well, if you're bound to go, I might as well go, too. I'm not going to stay here alone." After this whispered reply Florence began following her.

Without speaking another word the two girls climbed on up the slope. Cautiously they peeked through the mesquite and chaparral to see if they could notice anyone in or around the car.

As soon as they were satisfied that there was no one in sight, Jo Ann made her way up to the old Ford and peered inside, Florence close behind.

Both girls opened their eyes wide on seeing the quantities of pottery and baskets piled in the back of the car.

Just as Jo Ann was about to whisper to Florence that she believed the car belonged to smugglers, she suddenly noticed that there was steam jetting out from the radiator. She pointed meaningly to the steam.

Florence caught the point immediately. Since the engine was still hot the car must have been hidden there only a few minutes before. Without saying a word she indicated to Jo Ann that they must hurry away.

Jo Ann lingered for one long keen-eyed look at the battered old car and especially at the license tag. She was determined to be able to identify the car if she should see it again. She felt that there was something mysterious about its being hidden there. A moment later she followed Florence back down the slope. Silently they continued on down the gully.

On noticing a path leading upward a few yards ahead on the left, Jo Ann opened her lips to remark about it. Before she could utter a word, a man's angry voice floated down, speaking rapidly in Spanish. What was it he was saying? Something about——

Florence caught hold of her hand in a convulsive clutch, and she turned to see Florence's eyes dilated in terror.

Simultaneously a second voice sounded, with an even more angry ring in it.

"Hurry! Let's run!" Florence breathed.

To Florence's consternation, Jo Ann darted straight up the path. Just before reaching the

top she halted and peered cautiously in the direction of the men's voices, then scurried silently back.

Together the two ran up the gully, not even halting when thorns tore Florence's skirt and scratched a red gash in one of Jo Ann's legs.

"Those men must 've said something terrible to scare Florence this way," Jo Ann thought as she ran. "All I could make out were the words "money" and "thief."

On the two rushed, with only a hurried glance backward now and then.

When at last, panting and puffing, they reached the road, Jo Ann gasped, "What 'd—they say?"

"The first one said—'he's a thief—cheating us—I'm going to kill him.' "

"Wh-ew!" Jo Ann ejaculated while Florence was catching her breath. "The other—what 'd he say?"

"He said, 'I'll help—you kill him.' Then he said—something about some packages weighing more than his enemy had paid them for."

"Did he say what was in the packages?"

"No."

"I believe those men are smugglers, don't you?"

Florence nodded. "I feel sure they are."

"Do you suppose they belong to that gang of smugglers the mystery man was after?"

"Hard to say."

"I believe I'll know those men if I ever see them again—their car, too." Jo Ann threw another hasty glance over her shoulder. "We'd better get away from this place soon as possible."

"But the engine's so hot—and we haven't any water."

"Here's hoping the engine's cooled off by now."

When they reached the car, Jo Ann glanced anxiously to see if the steam were still rising.

"Thank goodness!" she murmured as she saw there was no sign of misty vapor rising from the radiator. "We'll get away from this spot in a hurry."

When they reached the car, Peggy called out, "We'd decided you'd tumbled into a water hole or the Rio Grande and drowned. What kept you so long?"

"Er—we——" began Florence.

Jo Ann broke in hurriedly with, "We couldn't find any water."

"What 'll we do?" Miss Prudence spoke up quickly. "We can't go on without water, can we?"

"Yes, the engine's cooled enough by now."

"But it would be the height of folly to start out on a desert road without water."

By that time Jo Ann had started the car, but not before both she and Florence had looked anxiously toward the gully.

"Something happened down in that gully that scared them," Peggy told herself knowingly on noticing their anxious side glances and the excited expression in their eyes. "As soon as I get them off to themselves, I'm going to find out."

CHAPTER VI

A FAMILIAR FACE

IT WAS with the keenest relief that Jo Ann managed to start the car and drive away before the men appeared. She was not alone in feeling relieved.

Florence's taut body relaxed, and she remarked, in a low tone, "That was a narrow escape. If those men 'd seen us, no telling——" She left her sentence unfinished.

Jo Ann nodded understandingly. Those men would have been more angry than ever if they had known that she and Florence had been listening to them and peeking into their car. It was too bad she and Florence couldn't have got some water, but she would far rather run the risk of finding water elsewhere than for those men to have discovered them there.

Florence seemed to have read her thoughts as she remarked the next moment, "Surely we'll be able to find some water soon. We've just got to get some before we go much farther."

The engine soon began to boil again, and Jo Ann was almost in despair. "Now what 'll we do?"

The next instant Florence cried excitedly, "There's a water carrier! We can get water from him."

"You mean that donkey cart jogging ahead there with the barrel on it?"

"Yes. The Mexican's carrying water to some ranch house or village, and maybe we can get him to sell us some."

In a flurry of dust Jo Ann stopped the car beside the cart, and Florence called out in Spanish to the old wrinkled water carrier, *"Buenos tardes, señor.* Will you sell us a little water?"

At the sound of Florence's voice the lazy burro promptly stopped, and the man stood peering at them from under his big sombrero.

"See," Florence went on, "we need water for our car. Will you sell us some?"

"Muy bien." He nodded his head and reached for the bucket Jo Ann was holding out to him.

"Thank my stars someone knows where to get water in this awful desert!" Miss Prudence exclaimed, feeling relieved at sight of the water. "Do you suppose that is the only way the people have of getting water out here, Florence?"

"Probably so."

"Well, I'd certainly hate to live here! Imagine having to drink that water! And washing dishes and clothes in a thimbleful of water wouldn't suit me at all, either. I have the whole Atlantic Ocean right at the edge of my home in Massachusetts."

Florence smiled at the contrast of life in the desert and on the seacoast.

After they had filled the radiator and their thermos jug with the precious fluid, they drove off, the girls and Carlitos all calling a smiling *"adios"* to the water carrier.

A little later, at the old stone house on the edge of the village, they were halted and their passports examined. As they were waiting for one of the men to look over the papers Carlitos and Florence talked in Spanish to the other man. Jo Ann half smiled to herself as she noticed Miss Prudence's evident disapproval at seeing Carlitos's delight on finding someone with whom to speak Spanish.

Catching Jo Ann's expression, Miss Prudence remarked crisply, "I can't get used to having a foreigner for a nephew. I have my doubts if he'll ever get to be a genuine American."

"I wish I knew Spanish as well as he does. I love the language—it's beautiful," Jo Ann replied. "I'd be glad, if I were you, that he knows it; maybe he'll soon be speaking English as easily as Spanish."

"I hope so."

As Jo Ann drove the car slowly through the narrow streets of the quaint old village, the girls gazed interestedly at the adobe and stone houses

and the picturesque church with its bell tower. From behind half-closed doors they caught glimpses of dark, eager faces peering at them. A moment later the road sloped down an abrupt hill, and there was nothing to be seen but the bleak expanse of desert.

"There's a weird beauty about the desert," Peggy commented thoughtfully to Florence as she gazed at the vast stretch of silvery grays and tawny browns which were rolled out before them and silhouetted against the deep blue of the sky.

"I've decided there's no spot on earth where there isn't beauty of some description. I agree with you that the desert has its share of loveliness."

"And it has its share of washes and gullies too," spoke up Miss Prudence as the car suddenly dipped into a deep cut which jolted them vigorously from side to side.

About an hour later, Carlitos suddenly exclaimed, "Oh, look—the mountains! See, over there!"

The other four stared in the southwesterly direction in which he was pointing, and soon all were able to distinguish the low irregular purple line of mountains.

"The sight of those mountains thrills me," declared Florence with a joyous exultation that the other girls and Carlitos shared. "Just think! Back of that line there's another higher range, then another."

From then on they watched the mountains become more and more distinct, the deep purple changing into a soft, mauve-tinted gray, while the distant ranges gradually came into view, their lofty majestic peaks cloud-wreathed.

When at last they reached the main paved highway, Miss Prudence's expression brightened. "Thank my stars we're on a good road at last!"

"Oh boy! What a road!" cried Jo Ann as she turned into the smooth-paved highway.

The miles seemed to fly by, and almost before she realized it they had reached the first moun-

tain range and begun to climb the walled-in highway which wound back and forth up the mountain side.

So intent was Jo Ann upon keeping the car close to the cliffs, she could catch only fleeting glimpses of the valley below and of the road beyond as it threaded its way higher and higher. The other four, however, had plenty of time to drink in the majestic beauty of the scenery.

Several times Miss Prudence became alarmed over Jo Ann's ability to manage Jitters and started to caution her, but each time Peggy broke in with such warm praises of Jo Ann's driving that she subsided. "Jo never lets her nerves run away with her," Peggy declared. "She always keeps her head in emergencies, like the good scout that she is."

"She may be able to keep her nerves from running away, but can she keep this old Ford from running amuck?" Miss Prudence came back sharply.

"Sure. Jitters is hitting on all four—humming

along like a—well, maybe not like a Cadillac, exactly, but at least like a much better car."

In spite of Peggy's encouragement Miss Prudence did not cease to be nervous till they reached a more level stretch.

When at last they came in sight of the city, the girls' and Carlitos's excitement reached the boiling point.

"Now I can speak de Spanish in de city," exulted Carlitos, oblivious of Miss Prudence's frown.

"Oh, don't you hope the band plays tonight so we can promenade around the Plaza?" exclaimed Peggy. "That's the most fun! The lovely music—those beautiful dark-eyed señoritas—and, oh, those handsome men! Light of my eyes! Pride of my heart!" Peggy placed her hand over her heart in a ridiculously exaggerated gesture that sent Florence into peals of laughter.

Suddenly remembering that Peggy's exaggerated acting might have been misunderstood by Miss Prudence, Florence hastily checked her

mirth and remarked, "Peggy doesn't mean anything by her raving. She's perfectly harmless."

On nearing the outskirts of the city Miss Prudence suggested to Florence that, as she was familiar with the hotels, she choose the best one and drive directly to it. "When I say choose the best one, I mean the most modern one," she explained.

"There's a beautiful new one just built recently that I know you'll like," Florence replied, then added, "I'd better drive the rest of the way, as I'm familiar with the city and the narrow one way streets."

Jo Ann stopped the car saying, "I'm glad to turn the wheel over to you. I'd get all mixed up on the one-way streets and go in the wrong direction every time, since all the signs are in Spanish."

With eyes eager and shining, the four young people viewed the streets, the shops and houses, and the crowds in the downtown section.

When Florence stopped the car in front of the

city's most modern hotel, Miss Prudence went with Florence and Peggy to see about rooms while Jo Ann stayed in the car with Carlitos.

A smiling little black-eyed Mexican newsboy ran up to the car to try to sell them a paper, and Carlitos promptly bought one; not that he wanted to read it, but because he wanted to talk to a real Mexican boy once more. He was still chatting with him in a lively flow of Spanish when Miss Prudence came back. At first she frowned in disapproval, then began to smile. "I might as well be resigned to having a little Mexican for a nephew," she remarked to Jo Ann. "Carlitos loves Mexican people and their language."

"I do, too," Jo Ann replied. "Spanish is such a beautiful language, and the people here—why, there aren't any friendlier, more smiling people anywhere in the world."

As soon as they had gone up to their cheerful, airy hotel rooms, bathed and dressed, it was time for supper. At Florence's suggestion they went

to an old restaurant with a more distinctive Mexican atmosphere and cookery than the hotel had. The girls, as well as Carlitos, thoroughly enjoyed ordering from a menu card written in both Spanish and English.

Miss Prudence smiled whimsically as she glanced at the card and remarked to Florence and Carlitos, "You two may order your food in Spanish, but not I." Her smile suddenly disappeared on noticing the high prices: "Scrambled eggs—forty cents," she read. "Why, that's terrible!"

"But that's in Mexican money," laughed Florence. "That's only about thirteen cents in American."

Miss Prudence nodded. "O-oh! I see. I'd forgotten about that."

It was a delicious meal that the alert, polite waiter brought them, and even Miss Prudence, who at first was dubious about Mexican cookery's comparing favorably with New England's, praised it enthusiastically.

Florence and Carlitos, though, enjoyed it most of all.

"That *chocolaté* is the best I've had since I left Mexico last fall," Florence declared, while Carlitos was all smiles over the *frijoles* and *chile con carne.*

When they left the restaurant, it was twilight, and they could hear the band in the little park, or plaza, as it was called, playing an old Mexican air.

"Oh, let's go to the Plaza now and promenade!" exclaimed Peggy eagerly. "I adore walking around and around the square with the crowds."

"Yes, let's," agreed Florence. "You want to go, too, don't you, Jo Ann?"

"Of course. I may let you girls do the strolling around while I sit on one of the spectators' benches and——"

"Pooh!" scoffed Peggy. "You're no Methuselah. You'll have to promenade too. When you're in Mexico, do as the Mexicans do, my

dear." Realizing that Miss Prudence had not given her consent to their plan, she began explaining how the Mexican girls walked slowly round and round the square, while the boys walked equally as slowly on the inside in the opposite direction, exchanging smiles and a few words now and then but not stopping. "And chaperons! I never saw so many. You won't have seen Mexico unless you see this scene."

Miss Prudence smiled. "That being the case, I'll have to go with you."

As soon as they had reached the Plaza, Miss Prudence and Carlitos found seats, and the three girls joined the laughing, dark-eyed señoritas, mingling with them and feeling a warm kinship —a oneness with them.

Jo Ann, having been the one on the outside, found her attention centered on the spectators sitting or standing near the curb rather than on the boys on the inside of the Plaza.

Just as she reached one of the corners, she caught a sudden glimpse of a familiar face in

the crowd in the background. Her heart leaped. There was the mystery man! The very man to whom she had listened in the hotel in Houston. Thank goodness, he hadn't lost his life!

As she slowed her steps to look over her shoulder at him to assure herself that she was not mistaken, Florence pulled her along saying, "No fair stopping—you're blocking the line."

"Yes, but I just saw the mystery man on that corner, and I——"

"Jo! I declare you must have that man on your mind. You're probably imagining that it's he. Someone resembling him, perhaps it was."

"No—no! It was he. When we get back around to that corner I'll point him out to you."

"Who's that you're going to point out, Jo?" broke in Peggy.

"The mystery man! I've just seen him. I wish you didn't have to keep going in the same direction."

Jo Ann could scarcely wait to get back to that corner. It seemed miles around the square to her

this time. When at last she reached the corner again, she gazed eagerly about for the stalwart, keen-eyed stranger, but he was not to be seen anywhere.

"Oh, shoot! He's gone!" she exclaimed, exasperated. "And I wanted to tell him about those smugglers we saw back there in the desert."

CHAPTER VII

"WE MUST GET AN EARLY START"

PEGGY STRETCHED her eyes wide. "Smugglers! You actually saw some smugglers in the desert?"

"Sh! Not so loud," Jo Ann warned, low-voiced. "We think they were smugglers, but of course we can't be absolutely certain."

"So that was what you and Florence were so excited about when you came back to the car out there in the desert. Hurry up and tell me all about it."

"We can't—not here, with all these people around. Wait till we get to the hotel; then we'll tell you everything, won't we, Florence?"

Florence nodded assent.

After a second time around the Plaza without seeing the mystery man, Jo Ann was more disappointed than ever.

When they reached the place where Miss Prudence and Carlitos were sitting, Miss Prudence gestured to them to step from the line and come to her side. "Girls," she began as soon as they walked over, "I think we'd better leave now and go on back to the hotel. You know the trip tomorrow up the mountains to the mine is bound to be a very hard one. We must get an early start in the morning."

On hearing these familiar words, "get an early start," the girls exchanged swift glances but succeeded in keeping sober expressions on their faces.

Peggy protested lightly, "This music is so lovely, I hate to leave it."

"You'll be able to hear it from your room at the hotel—it's so close by," Miss Prudence replied.

"Peggy likes to promenade as well as to hear the music," Florence put in, teasing.

"She'll have other opportunities to promenade, probably."

"Yes," put in Florence. "The mine is not so far away but what we can come back here at least a few times this summer."

Miss Prudence rose from the bench and started toward the hotel, the girls following, but not without several backward glances at the fascinating Plaza and the gay young crowd.

Peggy would not have followed as meekly if it had not been that she was eager to hear Florence's and Jo Ann's tale about the smugglers. Jo Ann, too, would not have been so willing to go if it had not been that the mystery man had disappeared and she now felt that she would not get a chance to tell him about the smugglers.

When they reached the hotel, Florence, who was to be Miss Prudence's roommate, went on with Jo Ann and Peggy to their room, explaining to Miss Prudence that she would come to bed shortly.

As soon as Peggy had closed the door of their room, she ordered, "Tell that tale about the smugglers from beginning to end. I knew some-

thing exciting had happened to you back there in the desert, and I don't know why I forgot to ask about it sooner unless it was because I was so interested in getting to the city."

Jo Ann, with Florence's frequent promptings, quickly recounted the details about the hidden car, its contents, and the men's angry conversation.

"Wh-ew, I'm glad I didn't go with you after the water," Peggy exclaimed when they had finished. "I'd have been sure to have shrieked or squealed, and they'd have discovered me. One thing I don't understand, though, is what makes you so certain they were smugglers. The fact that they had baskets and pottery in their car doesn't prove that they were trying to take them across the border without paying duty, does it?"

"No," Jo Ann replied. "Think what a good blind the pottery and baskets would be! It would look as if the men were regular merchants buying Mexican wares for the trade in the States, wouldn't it?"

Peggy nodded.

"Then think how easy it 'd be to conceal dope or gold in the jars and vases and baskets. It's dope or gold—or both—they're probably smuggling. The chances are the packages the men complained about not being weighed correctly held one or both of those articles."

"That's so. Those are the things the coast guard said were smuggled most frequently."

"I'm not going to be satisfied till I see my mystery man again," Jo Ann went on earnestly. "I could tell him the exact spot where we'd seen that hidden car, and that might be the very bit of information he needs to be able to catch the men."

"I shouldn't be at all surprised if those men belong to the gang that man's trying to break up. I wish, Jo, you could see that mystery man and tell him all this, but in this big city"—Florence shook her head dubiously—"your chances of seeing him again are small."

Jo Ann's chin took on a determined little tilt.

"I'm coming back here as soon as I can and look for him. I believe this main plaza is a good place to look for him, too. It's a sort of central meeting place for everybody."

Florence nodded. "That's true. Everybody naturally gravitates toward the Plaza. It's the very heart of the city."

Long after Florence had left to go to Miss Prudence's room and Peggy was sound asleep, Jo Ann lay wide awake pondering over plans for getting back to the city and for finding the mystery man. She had to leave early tomorrow with the others, as all arrangements had been made for Florence's father and Carlitos's uncle, Mr. Eldridge, to meet them at a small village on the way to the mine.

It was well that they did get an early start the next morning, as the nearer they approached the high mountain range beyond the city, the steeper and more dangerous the road became.

"I think we'll have to leave our car at the village and go the rest of the way to La Esperanza

by oxcart or horses," said Peggy. "That's the way Mr. Eldridge said they had to do last summer." She smiled over at Miss Prudence. "Which will you choose, the oxcart or a horse?"

"A horse every time," came back the quick reply. "I love to ride horseback."

"Grand!" approved Jo Ann.

"I'll feel safer—more comfortable, too—on a good horse than in this car." Miss Prudence added whimsically, "I beg your pardon for knocking Jitters that way."

Jo Ann smiled broadly. Miss Prudence was a good scout after all. She could ride horseback and condescended now and then to a bit of slang, such as the word "knocking" just then.

When they neared San Geronimo where they were to meet Dr. Blackwell and Mr. Eldridge, the faces of all five began to glow with anticipation. Florence could hardly wait to see her father, and Carlitos his uncle Mr. Eldridge, who was Miss Prudence's only brother.

As soon as she caught sight of the flat-roofed

adobe houses of the village Florence began exulting, "I'll soon see Dad now! He'll be waiting at old Pedro's store."

"We'll hate to give you up," put in Peggy. "We'll miss you so much!"

"It won't be long till I'll be coming over to see you, and then you can come over and visit with me and see our city again."

"So we'll end up in spending the summer together after all," laughed Jo Ann.

Florence nodded so emphatically that Peggy's face brightened again.

In a few more minutes Florence stopped the car in front of the little store, then leaped out and into the arms of a tall, distinguished, gray-haired man, crying, "Daddy! Oh, Daddy! I'm so glad to see you."

Just then a tall thin man and a small black-eyed Mexican boy rode up on horses and leaped off.

At sight of them Carlitos shouted joyfully, "My uncle and Pepito! My Pepito!" He sprang

out of the car, ran over and greeted his uncle hastily, then flew over to the grinning little Mexican and threw his arms affectionately about him.

"Who is that child?" Miss Prudence demanded of Jo Ann after they had all exchanged greetings with Mr. Eldridge.

"That's Pepito, his foster brother—the son of the nurse who took care of Carlitos so many years. They love each other like real brothers."

"We-ell, I suppose they should feel that way," Miss Prudence said slowly. "After all, all the peoples of the earth are 'of one blood'—so the Good Book says."

"We believe that in theory but don't always practice it, as Carlitos and Pepito do," put in Mr. Eldridge, secretly amused at his sister's inward struggle to accept this relationship between her nephew and the little Mexican.

"Where 're the horses we're to ride?" Peggy asked curiously after looking about on all sides.

"Or are we going to ride in that oxcart over there?"

"No, that won't be necessary. I left the horses on up the road about twelve miles," Mr. Eldridge answered. "I've had the road repaired so you can drive the car to the foot of the mountain."

"Why, that's grand!" exclaimed both girls together. "Not that we don't like to ride horseback," added Jo Ann, "but we can travel so much faster in Jitters."

After many words of farewell Florence and her father drove off down the highway which led to the town farther into the interior where they lived.

In a few more minutes, Jo Ann was steering Jitters out of the village and into the road which led to the mine. She had only two other passengers now, as Carlitos insisted on riding on the horse with Pepito.

Just as she was about to pass a little shack on the outskirts of the village, she caught sight of

an empty old Ford parked under a mesquite tree just off the road. She stared at it incredulously, then cried out a sharp, "Oh, there's that same car we——" She checked her words suddenly, swerving the car dangerously near an irrigation ditch at the side of the road.

"Mercy!" gasped Miss Prudence from the back seat. "What are you trying to do—turn us over?"

Jo Ann's face flamed with excitement and embarrassment.

"No'm," she said meekly as she drove on slowly. "I—I—really—I don't—see why I did such a silly trick."

Under cover of the car's noise, a little later, Peggy asked curiously, "What on earth made you so excited over seeing that old car?"

Jo Ann's voice was barely audible as she replied, "Because it was the car Florence and I saw hidden up in that gully in the desert. Smugglers."

"O-oh! Are you absolutely sure?"

Jo Ann nodded. "It had the same license number, and the radiator was bumped in exactly the same places."

CHAPTER VIII

AT THE MINE

WHEN THEY NEARED the foot of the lofty mountains and the end of the automobile road, Jo Ann parked the car in front of a small thatched adobe house. "This is the jumping-off place," she smiled. "Here's where we leave Jitters and get our horses."

Miss Prudence eyed the house curiously. "This must be where Ed told me we were to change into our riding clothes. He said for us to be ready by the time he and the boys got here. I don't fancy going into a strange house in a strange——" She stopped abruptly as a fat, smiling-faced Mexican woman appeared at the open door and began beaming her welcome and punctuating her Spanish with gestures for them to come inside.

Summoning her limited Spanish, Jo Ann replied with a *"Gracias,"* then turned and translated the woman's welcoming words to Miss Prudence.

After a moment's hesitation Miss Prudence followed the girls into the house. Her keen eyes quickly took in the room, which had a neat, well-kept appearance in spite of its dirt floor and primitive furniture.

The woman disappeared into the other room, evidently the kitchen, as they could hear her rattling dishes and beating vigorously with some utensil.

"I hope she's making us some *chocolaté,"* Jo Ann whispered to Peggy as they slipped into their khaki riding trousers.

"I hope so too. I'm hungry as a bear. Mountain air always gives me a ravenous appetite."

"Here, too. I could wrap myself around a substantial meal right now, and it 'll probably be two hours yet till we reach the mine—and supper."

As Jo Ann's thoughts turned on the distance to the mine, she wondered how she would be able to get back to the city and find the mystery man. Now that she had seen the car of those suspected smugglers in the village so close by, she felt it was more imperative than ever for her to tell the mystery man about them and their whereabouts. "I've simply got to get in touch with him some way," she told herself.

So intent was she upon these thoughts that she did not heed Peggy's nudging her till she squealed out, "Can't you put on your boots, Peg, without poking me in the side?"

"Oh, I most humbly beg your pardon," Peggy replied, her twinkling eyes showing that her apology was anything but abject.

Catching her gesture, a nod of the head in Miss Prudence's direction, Jo Ann looked over at Miss Prudence. The next moment her eyes opened in astonishment. That long, full, navy skirt Miss Prudence had on—how on earth was she ever going to ride in that thing? That must

be one of those old-fashioned side-saddle riding skirts she'd heard her grandmother talk about. It 'd be absolutely dangerous to ride side saddle in this mountainous country. She'd often heard how easily such a saddle was tipped out of balance and the rider thrown off. The next moment she relaxed as the thought occurred to her that there were no side saddles in this part of the country. Perhaps she'd better tell her that.

Somewhat embarrassed, Jo Ann stammered, "Er—Miss Prudence—er—they don't have any —side saddles down here."

Miss Prudence looked puzzled as she replied Yankee-fashion with a question, "Well, who wants one?" Seeing the girls' eyes fastened on her skirt, she smiled, "This isn't one of those old side-saddle riding skirts. It's a divided skirt." There was a note of pride in her voice as she added, "I was the first woman in my part of the country to begin riding astride. I shocked the older people dreadfully."

"I think you were a good sport, Miss Prudence, to start that style," Peggy remarked.

Miss Prudence received this praise with a pleased smile.

Just then the Mexican woman entered with a tray of food which she set on a little table near by. Gesturing and talking rapidly to Jo Ann, she explained, "I think you have much hunger, and I make you some *chocolaté*."

Though Jo Ann's reply was made in broken Spanish, it was straight from her heart. "*Gracias*. You are most kind. We have hunger after the long ride. And *chocolaté*—I love it." She raised the cup to her lips and drank a little of the rich, frothy liquid. "This is very delicious."

Peggy and Miss Prudence nodded a smiling approval to the woman, and her black eyes glowed with happiness at the praise, both spoken and unspoken.

A few minutes after they had finished eating, Mr. Eldridge and the two boys rode up.

On going outside Jo Ann saw that there were

three other horses saddled and waiting for them. She noticed, too, that José, Pepito's father, was standing near by, his arms caressingly about Carlitos, whom he loved almost as dearly as he did his own son. Carlitos's face was aglow with happiness at being reunited with his Mexican friends.

After she and Peggy had mounted, they watched with curious eyes to see how Miss Prudence manipulated that queer skirt. When they saw her unbutton the front panel and fold it back and refasten it on another set of buttons, they saw that it was a divided skirt after all.

Peggy leaned over from her horse to murmur to Jo Ann, "It looks like a pair of floppy-legged pajamas now."

Jo Ann nodded, then added, grinning, "I prefer to sleep in pajamas and ride in trousers. It's so much more modest."

Peggy suppressed a giggle with difficulty at the thought of the proper Miss Prudence's ever wearing anything but the most correct clothes.

Notwithstanding the queer skirt, they found that Miss Prudence rode unusually well, handling her horse with the ease of an experienced horsewoman.

Up the steep mountain trail they began climbing in single file, José in the lead. The sheer precipice at the edge looked so dangerous to Jo Ann that she tried to keep from looking over. One good thing, they had an excellent guide in José. He had led her and Florence over worse places than this.

On nearing the mine a strange feeling of tenseness filled the girls and Carlitos; and yet that was not surprising, as the mine had been the scene of the most thrilling adventures they had ever experienced. It was here that they had been rescued from the treacherous mine foreman who had stolen the mine from Carlitos's father.

On their arrival at the great stone house that this foreman had so proudly built for his own use, they found José's wife, Maria, the nurse who had reared Carlitos as one of her family.

Though she was only a poor ignorant woman of the peon class, the girls as well as Carlitos loved her.

"Maria has a heart of gold," Jo Ann told Miss Prudence as they watched her enfold Carlitos in her arms and kiss him on each cheek. "She loves him as she does her own Pepito and her girls."

A few minutes later Maria proudly showed Carlitos to his room, into which she had put the best of everything, then took Miss Prudence and the girls to adjoining rooms, which looked bare and forbidding with their concrete floors, scant furniture, and curtainless, iron-barred windows.

"Looks like a soldiers' barracks," Miss Prudence said crisply after a swift glance about.

Jo Ann laughed, then said, "You should have seen this house as it was the first time I saw it. There was a grand piano in every room with a game rooster tied to one of the piano legs."

Miss Prudence gasped. "A rooster in every

room! Heavens! You mean to say this whole house was a chicken coop?"

"Not exactly. It was just that Mexican foreman's idea of the luxurious life. He loved music and cock fighting, so he wanted the pianos and roosters handy."

"Heavens!" gasped Miss Prudence again. "Why, I must fumigate this whole house, clean it with Old Dutch Cleanser, Lysol——"

"Oh, Maria cleaned it long ago—thoroughly," broke in Jo Ann quickly, seeing that the anxious-eyed Maria was watching Miss Prudence's frown of evident disapproval and was worried. She turned now to Maria and said in Spanish, "The house is very clean. You have worked hard."

Maria's grave eyes brightened. "Yes, the little girls and I work hard." She gestured to the window and the corners of the room. "See, I clean it good like Carlitos's mamá show me."

Though Miss Prudence had caught from these gestures that Maria was showing how thor-

oughly she had cleaned the house, she was far from being convinced that it was fit for human habitation. Again she broke into a list of the different kinds of cleansing materials and things that she would need.

"We'll have to go to the city to get all those things," put in Peggy. "They won't have them in the little store in the village."

Jo Ann's eyes suddenly began to shine. Here was her chance to get back to the city to find the mystery man. She could stop in the village and find out what those smugglers were doing there. Maybe they were buying baskets and pottery from the villagers. She'd soon find out now.

The first moment she and Peggy were alone she told her of her plans.

Peggy laughed. "I knew that's what you were planning. You can't resist a mystery, can you?"

"And you're almost as eager as I am to have a finger in my mystery pie. You know you're crazy to go to the city with me."

"Of course I am."

CHAPTER IX

MISS PRUDENCE'S CLEANING SPREE

BEFORE DROPPING TO SLEEP that night Jo Ann decided that as soon as she got up in the morning she would urge Miss Prudence to let her and Peggy go to the city. "I'll tell her what this house needs worse than another cleaning is some pretty cretonne for curtains and pillows, and some of the lovely Mexican pottery and bright-colored blankets. I could stop at the village and buy the pottery and blankets. There were some pieces of pottery outside that shack near where the smugglers' car was parked. That 'd give me a grand chance to find out from the family in the shack about the smugglers. Then I'd have more to tell the mystery man—if I can find him. Finding him—that 'll be the hard part."

Still visioning ways and plans for this trip to the city, she finally drifted off to sleep.

She was roused early the next morning by a cold hand upon her bare shoulder. Horrors! One of those smugglers had grabbed her—she'd jerk away from him! She sprang out of bed with a leap that sent her into the middle of the room, then stood staring dazedly at an amazed Miss Prudence.

"Why, I didn't mean to frighten you, Jo Ann," she said apologetically. "I just meant to wake you early so——"

"O-oh, it's just you!" gasped Jo Ann, feeling very foolish at seeing it was only Miss Prudence. "I must 've been dreaming. I thought one of those——" She stopped abruptly. She must not say a word about having seen those smugglers. No use to get Miss Prudence stirred up and excited over them.

"I'm sorry I scared you," Miss Prudence began again, "but I thought we ought to get an early start to——"

"But we're at the end of our journey," broke in Peggy, who was sitting up in bed now, rubbing her eyes sleepily. "We don't have any place to start early to."

"What I began to say was that we ought to get an early start at giving this house a thorough cleaning," Miss Prudence went on, undisturbed by Peggy's interruption.

"The house looks clean to me—very clean," Jo Ann remarked.

"Maria may have gone through the motions of cleaning, but"—Miss Prudence raised her eyebrows skeptically—"a peon housekeeper's ideas of cleaning and an American's are two different things."

"Don't you want us to go to the city to get some—some fumigating stuff—formaldehyde, isn't that what you call it?" Jo Ann asked eagerly.

"No, I've decided it isn't necessary to have the place fumigated. I've decided there's enough laundry soap here to begin with. Ed says he's

ordered more, and a lot of supplies that should have come to the village yesterday. He thinks they'll come today surely. I'll make plenty of strong suds, and we can begin scrubbing this morning. When we get through, this place 'll be as bright as a new penny."

"It 'll still be dreadfully bare, though," Jo Ann remarked tentatively. "As you said last night, it looks as bare as a barracks. What it needs is gay cretonne draperies and pillows, bright-colored blankets to throw over the chests and couches, and some of the lovely Mexican *ollas*. As soon as we get the house clean, let's go to the city to get the draperies. We can probably find some pottery and blankets at the village."

"Well, we'll think about that later."

"The sooner we get this house fixed up, the longer we'll have to enjoy it," spoke up Peggy, coming to Jo Ann's aid. She knew how Jo Ann's heart was set on getting back to the city. "Let's try to have it all done by the time Florence comes."

"Well, we'll see."

The girls had to content themselves with that vague promise.

After Miss Prudence had left the room and the girls were dressing, Jo Ann remarked, "I haven't given up hope yet of going to the city soon. I'm going to try to persuade Miss Prudence to let us go to the village this afternoon for the supplies that Mr. Eldridge is expecting."

"I'll help persuade her." Peggy changed the subject abruptly by saying, "I hate to have her hurt Maria's feelings by doing all this cleaning, don't you?"

Jo Ann nodded. "I'll try to smooth it over to Maria, but she'll never be able to understand such extreme ideas about sanitation."

As soon as they had finished eating breakfast, the girls entered industriously into Miss Prudence's "cleaning spree," as Jo Ann called it. While Peggy poured the soapy water over the concrete floors, Jo Ann scrubbed vigorously enough to satisfy even Miss Prudence.

"It's really fun," Jo Ann declared as she swished the foamy suds about with her broom.

Miss Prudence, a towel over her head and her long skirts tucked up and pinned in the back, bustled about superintending the girls, Maria and her oldest daughters, and the two boys.

Maria was horrified that Miss Prudence should set Carlitos, the chief owner of the silver mine and the house, to doing such menial tasks as carrying water from the stream back of the house. Miss Prudence, however, believed with St. Paul that he who would not work should not eat and soon had everybody in the household stepping lively.

"I wish that soap and other supplies 'd come today," she said, frowning as she took out the last bar of soap. "The supplies are very low. I can't plan a decent meal in this house without those things."

"Peggy and I'll go to the village for them this afternoon," Jo Ann offered eagerly. "We can drive the car and make better time than José can in the oxcart."

Miss Prudence hesitated a moment, then replied, "Well, if José can go with you, I believe you'd better go."

"Fine! I'm sure Mr. Eldridge 'll let José go. He sends him there frequently for the mail—every other day, I believe."

Jo Ann was right in this surmise. Mr. Eldridge promptly agreed to let José accompany the girls to the village. "José can take two burros along to carry the supplies," he added, "and he won't need the oxcart at all."

So it was that shortly after lunch the two girls and José started on horseback but changed into the automobile when they reached the foot of the mountain.

On reaching the village they drove straight to Pedro's store to see if the supplies had come. On finding that they had arrived, José set to work to load them into the car. While he was busy at that task, Jo Ann and Peggy walked back to the adobe shack where Jo Ann had seen the smugglers' car.

To Jo Ann's relief, the battered old car was not in sight.

"I'll have a far better chance to find out about the smugglers without their being on the scene," she remarked to Peggy.

As soon as they neared the shack, a thin, undernourished woman with a black *rebosa* about her shoulders and a baby in her arms appeared at the door. Peeping from behind her skirts were several other small, half-clad, hungry-looking children. As quickly as she could in her broken Spanish, Jo Ann explained that she wanted to buy some of the pottery jars piled up at the side of the house.

The woman shook her head and replied, "I have much sorrow that I cannot sell them to you. Two men in an automobile told me they take all my *ollas*."

"Was that their automobile I saw here near your house yesterday?"

The woman nodded.

"I must find out when they will be back," Jo

Ann thought quickly. "Can you not get more jars for these men by the time they come back, and sell me some of these you have now?" she asked tentatively.

"No, that is impossible. It takes much time to make the *ollas,* and the men say they come back in three or four days."

"Three or four days," Jo Ann thought. "I hope Florence comes on one of those days, so we'll have an excuse to come down here to meet her."

Peggy broke into her thoughts with, "Ask her the price of these jars. They're lovely." She picked up two jars, each attractively decorated with a design of cactus and Spanish dagger.

Jo Ann relayed this question to the woman. "How much do you sell these for?"

The woman went on to tell the price of each—an absurdly small amount, not a third as much as they were worth.

"Is that what those men pay you for them?" Jo Ann asked incredulously.

"Sí." The woman nodded.

Jo Ann repeated the price to Peggy, adding, "Those men are robbers, as well as——"

She left her sentence unfinished and turned back to the woman, saying, "They do not pay you enough. I will give you twice that much for these two *ollas.*"

The woman's eyes opened wide. "Ah—that is good. I have much need of money to buy food for my children." She hesitated a moment, then added, *"Bien,* I will let you have these two. The men will be angry, but then——" She shrugged her shoulders expressively.

Jo Ann's mind was working rapidly. Perhaps she could help this poor woman to market more of her pottery. Florence had a friend who purchased Mexican curios for a firm in the States. She would tell Florence about this woman's pottery. "I'll take these two *ollas.* Don't let those men have all your pottery after this. I will sell it for you at this price."

After Jo Ann had paid for the jars and had

promised the woman again to help sell more of the pottery for her, Peggy remarked as they were starting away, "I'm glad you paid that woman more for the *ollas,* but I'm afraid those men 'll be furious when they find out you're buying her pottery at double the price they pay. You're heading for trouble."

Jo Ann's face grew grave. "I shouldn't be surprised, but I'm glad just the same that I could help that family. Those poor little children look half starved to me."

"They surely do," Peggy agreed.

CHAPTER X

THE INDEFINITE MAÑANA

As soon as Jo Ann woke the third morning after their trip to the village, she reminded Peggy that they must go back without fail today. "You know Florence said she'd either be there by noon, or that there'd be a letter telling exactly when to expect her. It all depended, she said, on which day her father had to go to the city."

Peggy half smiled. "That's not the only reason you want to go to the village. You want to get another look at those smugglers and get some information about them; now, don't you?"

"Yes. I want to be able to give the straight facts to the mystery man—if I ever see him again. I want to find out how often those men come to the village—where they go on their trips farther into the interior—what it is they're smug-

gling—exactly what route they take on their way back to the border, and——"

"What do you think you are—a glorified kind of Sherlock or a whole detective agency?"

"Neither. Only I think we've bumped into a fascinating mystery that's daring us to solve it. I want to play safe, but if we can get any information that 'll aid in catching that band of smugglers and maybe help keep the mystery man from losing his life, I certainly want to get it."

"Well, don't get too venturesome. I've known you to get too enthusiastic about your mystery-solving. One good thing, José will go with us to the village. He'll be our bodyguard without knowing it."

To the girls' relief Miss Prudence gave her permission for them to accompany José to the village again. They were ready and waiting impatiently for him several minutes before he appeared with the horses and an extra pack burro.

"I'm afraid those smugglers 'll have come for

the pottery and gone before we get to the village, at this rate," Jo Ann fumed while she was waiting.

Peggy grinned. "So much the better for us. I, for one, never want to see them."

"I've got to find out their plans some way or other."

As before, they rode down the mountain, then left their horses and the burro at the rough thatched shed where their car was stored.

"Let's give this shed a name," Peggy suggested as they climbed into the car.

"All right," Jo Ann agreed. "How about calling it Jitters' House? That's what it is now. It's the first time the garage was so far away that I had to ride horseback to get to it."

Peggy smiled. "Hereafter, then, this is Jitters' House."

On nearing the Mexican woman's shack Jo Ann began looking eagerly to see if the pottery were still piled up beside it.

"Good!" she exclaimed. "The pottery's still

there. That means the men haven't——" She stopped in the middle of her sentence. José was beginning to understand English much better now that he was staying at Mr. Eldridge's home, and so might be able to get an inkling of what she was talking about.

As it was, Peggy understood, since Jo Ann had been worrying all the way down the mountain lest the pottery and the men should be gone.

Jo Ann drove straight to Pedro's store, the scheduled meeting place again, as it had been the day they had all driven from the city. There was no sign of Florence's small trim figure to be seen outside the store or inside.

"Maybe we're too early," Peggy suggested.

"We have to wait for the mail, anyway—it hasn't come yet, Pedro said," Jo Ann replied. "If there isn't a letter from her, we'll know she's coming and will wait till she appears. This delay suits me to a T."

"Don't I know it! You're just aching for those old smugglers to appear while we're here. I hope they don't."

Undisturbed, Jo Ann went on, "While we're waiting, let's you and me go back to that shack and find out if any of the family knows exactly when the men are coming after the pottery."

"We-ell, I s'pose there couldn't be any danger about asking a few questions."

Peggy climbed back into the car with Jo Ann, leaving José squatting on the sidewalk smoking his corn-shuck cigarette and chatting with a group of his peon friends.

When they stopped in front of the shack, they noticed a little dark-eyed girl, the tallest of the stair-step children she had seen previously, standing close to the piles of pottery. Jo Ann promptly leaped out of the car and walked over and began admiring the pottery.

"The *ollas* are very beautiful," she said in her slow Spanish. "Did you help to decorate them?"

"*Sí,* I fix this one." She picked up a small, brightly colored jar.

"It is lovely," admired Jo Ann. "You are very artistic."

The girl's black eyes shone, and two dimples

twinkled in her olive-tinted cheeks at this praise.

After she had looked at the pottery a few minutes longer, Jo Ann asked haltingly, "Do you know when the men are coming for your *ollas?*"

"Si," the girl nodded, her long black braids swaying with the motion. "They tell my papa they come *mañana.*"

"Mañana," Jo repeated to herself discouragedly. That was the most indefinite word in the Spanish language. It might mean tomorrow, and it might mean any time in months to come. "Do you mean Friday?" she asked.

"Si, Friday."

"What time?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe in the morning; maybe in the afternoon—I do not know."

"What time did they come last time they bought your pottery?"

The child shook her head. "I do not remember."

Just then the girl's mother appeared in the

doorway and smiled broadly on recognizing Jo Ann and Peggy.

Jo Ann walked over to the door and, after exchanging greetings with her, asked if she knew exactly when the men were coming after the pottery, ending, "Maybe they will sell me some more of your beautiful *ollas* when they come."

The woman answered with the same gesture as had her daughter—a shrug of her shoulders and, "I do not know."

"When do they usually come?" Jo Ann persisted.

"Last time they come about this hour. They stop at Pedro's store first; then they come here."

Jo Ann's eyes brightened. At last she had secured a bit of information.

As it turned out, this was the only piece forthcoming. Question after question brought forth only the inevitable but expressive shrug of the shoulders.

Though she could see Jo Ann was discouraged, Peggy could not help smiling and asking

teasingly, "Have you learned yet what this means?" She raised her eyebrows and shrugged her shoulders in true Mexican style.

"Silly!" Jo Ann exploded. The next moment she grinned and replied, "It means anything and everything. I'm going to cultivate that gesture myself and use it when anyone tries to quiz me."

When they reached the store, the mail had arrived and in it a letter from Florence.

Jo Ann tore open the envelope quickly, glanced over the short note, and handed it to Peggy, saying, "She'll be here tomorrow afternoon—and so 'll we be here." To herself she added that there might be two others who probably would not be very comfortable persons to have near.

CHAPTER XI

THE SECRET OF THE OLLA

THE GIRLS had thought that as usual José would accompany them to the village the next day. As it happened, however, there was some extra work for him to do about the mine, and Mr. Eldridge decided to send Carlitos and Pepito as escorts for them in place of José. "Each boy can ride a horse, and then on the way back they can ride double, as they did the first day, and let Florence have the extra horse," he said.

"Fine!" Jo Ann exclaimed.

Peggy was silent. The thought had darted into her mind that if those smugglers should chance to be in the village at the same time that they were, it would be more comfortable to have José along instead of the boys.

When they reached Jitters' House, the boys

suddenly decided to stay there and wait for the girls. "Pepito and I are going to build a dam in this stream," Carlitos explained, gesturing toward the small stream near by.

When a half hour later the girls passed the pottery woman's shack without seeing any sign of the smugglers' car, Peggy breathed a little more freely. "We'll probably leave before they get here," she thought.

As if in answer to her thoughts, Jo Ann spoke up briskly, "I see where we'll have to wait around the village till those men come. Since the pottery's still there, I know they haven't come yet."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," Peggy answered quickly. "We might have to stay so long it 'd be dark before we'd get back to the mine."

"Of course we can't wait that long. I'm in hopes they'll come soon, but I want to see them if I possibly can."

When they came in sight of Pedro's store, they saw Florence standing out in front, looking up the narrow street.

"Attaboy! There she is!" cried Jo Ann.

"She sees us now!" Peggy waved both arms vigorously, a gesture that was answered equally enthusiastically by Florence.

As soon as the three girls had exchanged the warmest of greetings and Florence and her baggage were settled in the car, Jo Ann broke into an account of having seen the smugglers' car, and all the other details.

Florence was indignant over the ridiculously low price the men were paying the villagers for their pottery. "You're right, Jo. Those men are thieves," she said. "They're making three or four hundred per cent profit on the pottery, to say nothing of what they're getting out of their smuggling. I believe I can pay that woman and the other villagers more than you did for their *ollas,* and ship them to the States, and still break even. When I see these poverty-stricken women with their big families to feed and clothe, I feel I've got to help them every chance I get."

"I do, too," agreed Jo Ann.

"And I," added Peggy. "But I don't want to get those smugglers angry at us. They'll be furious when they find out you're planning to buy all the pottery."

Both Jo Ann and Florence were silent a moment; then Jo Ann remarked, "Maybe we hadn't better buy all the pottery, because if we do, the men'll stop coming here altogether, and I won't get a chance to find out more about them to tell the mystery man. I want to help him—his life's at stake."

Florence nodded. "That's so." She turned to Peggy then with, "You're right. We'd better buy only a few pieces of pottery."

"Let's drive past the shack now and see if the smugglers' car is there," Jo Ann suggested, starting the car even as she spoke.

"That's all right with me if you'll keep on driving and not stop," Peggy spoke up.

Jo Ann drove very slowly past the pottery woman's house, but there was no sign of any kind of car to be seen. As the pottery was still there,

she knew the men were yet to come. She drove on a short distance, then turned into a rough road circling into the village. To Peggy's disapproval she turned again a few minutes later into the side road leading past the woman's house.

Almost simultaneously Jo Ann and Florence caught sight of the old car parked beside the house. "The smugglers' car!" they both gasped.

"Turn as fast as you can and get away from here," ordered Peggy.

Instead of obeying her command Jo Ann drew the car to the side of the road and stopped. "You stay in the car, Peggy, while Florence and I see if we can find out anything."

"Oh, do be careful!"

With Peggy's last words in their minds Jo Ann and Florence approached the shack cautiously, coming up close to the back of the house, where they halted. Though they could not see the smugglers and the woman except by peeping around the corner of the shack, they could hear them talking.

"They're trying to make her come down on the price, aren't they?" Jo Ann whispered.

"Yes; trying to force her down to a mere fraction of what the *ollas* are worth." An angry glint came into Florence's blue eyes. "I feel like marching right out and telling her not to——" She stopped whispering to listen to the woman's plaintive reply that she needed the money for food for her children.

Jo Ann caught the woman's words and their meaning. "Come on, let's see if we can't persuade or bluff them into giving more money."

Without hesitating, Florence stepped out, and together the two marched on around to where the men and the woman were standing.

At their approach the two swarthy-skinned men looked up in surprise. The taller one, who was a little squint-eyed and had a scar on his chin, drew his brows together into a deep frown as he peered from under his sombrero at Jo Ann.

Involuntarily Jo Ann caught her breath as the thought darted into her mind that he looked as

if he recognized her. "Perhaps he saw me there in the gully," she thought.

By that time Florence was talking to the woman in rapid Spanish, offering to buy all her pottery at almost three times more than the men had offered.

The taller man whirled about to stare at Florence and to scowl more fiercely than ever. "It is impossible for you to buy the *ollas*. She promise us all—everything."

Florence ignored this remark and asked the woman, "How much did they say in the first place that they would pay you?"

Between sobs the woman replied and added, "Now they say they will give me only half of that."

"Since they won't pay you what they had promised, then sell your pottery to me."

Both men broke into a torrent of protests, waving their arms and shaking their heads violently.

While they were absorbed in arguing with Florence, Jo Ann gradually edged over and

looked into the back of the car, the bottom of which was filled with pottery packed in straw. After one hasty glance over her shoulder at the men, she reached over and pulled out a large *olla* from the middle.

How heavy it was! She peered into it, then thrust her hand inside. There was a package—a heavy one—at the bottom.

Just then a furious voice rang out, "Put that *olla* back in the car!"

She wheeled about to see the shorter one of the men rushing angrily toward her.

CHAPTER XII

HEADING FOR TROUBLE

IN ANOTHER MOMENT the man had grabbed the *olla* out of Jo Ann's hand and had placed it back in its nest of straw in the car. "What are you doing?" he demanded sharply, edging between her and the car. "Leave these alone!"

Jo Ann detected a note of alarm in his voice. "He's afraid I've discovered the contents of that *olla,*" she thought. Determined to conceal her nervousness, she replied in as cool and controlled a voice as she could muster, "How much will you take for that *olla?*"

The man shook his head. "No—no. It is not for sale."

"I will give you fifty *centavos* for it."

"No—no. I cannot sell it."

"Well, how about seventy-five *centavos,* then?"

The merest shadow of a smile began to spread over the man's dark, unshaven face. Perhaps here was a chance for him to make a few extra *centavos,* and no one would be the wiser. He reached down in the car and after rummaging about for a few moments drew up another *olla* similar to the one Jo Ann had picked up. "Here —I let you have it," he said, offering it to her.

Jo Ann shook her head. "No, that is not the one I want. It is this one." She started to lean over the car, but the man stopped her.

"No, this is the only one I have to sell," he insisted. "See, it is beautiful! Seventy-five *centavos* is very cheap. I do not make anything."

"Cheap!" Jo Ann flung back at him, her eyes blazing. In her anger she had forgotten to be cautious. "I heard what you're paying for these *ollas.* You are a thief. Pay them more money, or I'll buy them all myself."

He scowled menacingly at her. "Ah, it was you who put evil things into that woman's head —demanding more money! They are lucky to

get that much. Do not interfere with my business again. *Sabe?"*

Before she could reply, the other man stepped up, an angry glint snapping in his eyes along with that same half-puzzled expression, as if he were still undecided about her identity. The two men exchanged a few whispered sentences so rapidly that she could not make out a single word. Every now and then they glanced in her direction.

"They're furious at me," she thought. "I don't want them to stop coming to the village. I'd better not say another word." She glanced over at Florence, who was motioning to her to leave. "Florence has come to the same conclusion. Time we're leaving this place."

She walked over to Florence, and after both had bade the woman and her children *"Adios,"* they started off down the road toward their car.

"Those men are watching us." Jo Ann remarked a few minutes later, after a swift backward glance over her shoulder. "I don't want

them to get so angry that they'll stop coming to the village, do you?"

"No. That's why I told the woman I could buy only a part of their pottery." A satisfied smile passed over Florence's face. "I hope that 'll force those men to pay more. They're very anxious to keep on buying here, because this village makes unusually good pottery."

"Their designs are beautiful. I think they'll keep on coming here." Jo Ann looked back over her shoulder again before adding, "They're still watching us. Did you notice how that taller one kept staring at me?"

Florence nodded. "It made me wonder if he'd seen you when you so foolishly ran up the side of that gully."

"But how was I going to be able to recognize them if I hadn't seen them?"

When they reached their car, Peggy began hurling questions at them.

"Florence 'll tell you everything," Jo Ann said as she started the car quickly and turned up the

rough road toward the city, adding, "I'm heading toward the city so those men won't know where we live."

After she had gone a short distance, she wound back out of the village by the rough back streets. When she finally cut back onto the main road, she threw an anxious look back up the road toward the village. There was no sign of a car to be seen.

"We fooled them," she said, well pleased.

"I believe we did," agreed Florence. "They probably think we live in the city."

When, two hours later, the girls and the two boys reached the mine, the girls had completely recovered from their nervousness over their encounter with the smugglers.

Florence was enthusiastic over the attractive appearance and cleanliness of the great stone house, which of course delighted Miss Prudence.

"While you are here, Florence," she said, "we'll all have to make a trip to the city to buy materials for draperies and couch and pillow covers to brighten up this gloomy old house. It still

reminds me of a barracks, even if it is clean."

"I think that 'll be fine," approved Florence, exchanging pleased glances with Jo Ann and Peggy. "We all love to go to the city."

Of the three Jo Ann was the most delighted. She must get to the city and find the mystery man, especially now that she had some more information about the smugglers. "Can't we go tomorrow, Miss Prudence?" she asked eagerly.

Miss Prudence shook her head. "No. I want to finish all the cleaning first."

"But the house is spotless now," Jo Ann protested.

"The kitchen is a downright disgrace. Why Maria insists on using that old fireplace to cook on when she has this new range, I can't understand. It makes such a mess. I told her I wanted that fireplace closed up. I want some shelves put up, too. There isn't any place to store our supplies. This kitchen wasn't built for convenience. It's big as all outdoors, but there's no place to put anything."

"Poor Maria!" thought Jo Ann. "She'll never understand Miss Prudence's ideas of a modern kitchen. She feels that the kitchen is her domain and won't like any interference. We'll have all we can do to keep peace in the family."

"We'll have to take Florence around the camp tomorrow and show her all the improvements," Peggy spoke up. She turned to Florence. "Mr. Eldridge 's had all the miners' ugly little shacks replaced with stone houses built of the natural stone from the quarry."

"Yes, I noticed a few of them as we came up. I'm so glad. It worried me to see the contrast between those horrible shacks and this great stone house."

"You'll be delighted to see the modern machinery they've put in the mine, too," Jo Ann put in. "They use electricity now for a good deal of the work, and that makes it lots easier on the miners—less dangerous, too. Mr. Eldridge 's promised to show us around tomorrow."

"Fine." Florence's face was aglow on hearing

of these improvements. She was as happy as the other girls to hear how the drudgery and squalor had been removed from the miners' lives since Mr. Eldridge had taken over the management of the mining company of which Carlitos was the chief stockholder. As all three girls owned stock in the company—a gift for their share in recovering the mine for him—they felt a personal responsibility for improving conditions.

"Don't you want to go with us on our ride about the camp tomorrow?" Jo Ann asked Miss Prudence.

"Yes, I've been wanting to ever since I came, but I've been so busy, you know. I'll get an early start at cleaning tomorrow morning, so I can go with you."

An amused expression slipped into each girl's face at the familiar words "an early start."

So it was that, immediately after the siesta hour, the girls and Miss Prudence set out on horseback on a general inspection trip of the mining camp.

"We won't have time to go down into the mine this time," Miss Prudence said as they rode off. "Ed says that he wants us to go all through it soon, though."

"We're very anxious to go down into the mine, aren't we, girls?" said Jo Ann.

"We surely are," both replied.

With the greatest satisfaction Jo Ann and Peggy pointed out the rows of neat, substantial limestone houses, each one very homelike with flowers and vines.

"The Mexicans love beauty," Florence remarked to Miss Prudence as they passed a house one side of which was covered with a bougainvillea vine aflame with pinkish purple flowers. The tiny yard was a riot of color, too.

"Yes, I've noticed that they are very fond of flowers," Miss Prudence agreed. "Carlitos told me today that Maria had asked him if I'd brought some flower seed with me—that she wanted to see if she could grow some new kinds of flowers."

Jo Ann, who had been listening to their conversation, now called out, "That reminds me, let's dig up some ferns and cactus—that kind that has bright red blossoms—this afternoon and plant them in our pottery jars. And let's make a rock garden in the patio, too, and plant all the different kinds of cacti we can find."

"A grand idea," the girls agreed, and Miss Prudence nodded approvingly.

As they approached the mine opening, Jo Ann proudly pointed out the electric tram cars which were used to carry the ore down the steep incline, instead of the burros, as formerly. "The biggest improvement of all, though, is the way they get the ore out of the mine. Mr. Eldridge has promised to take us down there some time soon."

After leaving the mine they rode a short distance on up the beautiful winding mountain trail, then reluctantly turned at Miss Prudence's suggestion and started homeward. Before leaving the trail, however, they persuaded her to

wait while they dismounted and dug up some cactus and resurrection plants.

"This cactus 'll look lovely in that big jar with the cactus design on it," Peggy explained to Miss Prudence. "And you'll love to watch these resurrection plants. You can keep them out of water for months, till they're dried, dead-looking balls, then put them into water, and they'll unfold and become green and beautiful again.."

Once again, when they were crossing the crystal clear stream that ran near the house, they begged Miss Prudence to halt. "Wait for us while we dig up some of these exquisite wild maidenhair ferns," Jo Ann urged, an appeal that the other two promptly echoed.

"All right," Miss Prudence agreed, halting under the shade of a rocky cliff over which trickled a tiny silver ribbon of water into a fern-edged pool.

Peggy began pulling up some of the ferns close by, but Jo Ann remarked, "I can't bear to spoil the beauty of this pool by taking any more

of these ferns. Let's go up the stream a little farther, Florence."

Jo Ann and Florence walked on along the stream in silent admiration and soon disappeared around a great moss-covered boulder.

Suddenly Florence caught sight of a short chunky figure of a man just ahead. She gasped aloud. Simultaneously Jo Ann's lower jaw dropped, and her eyes opened wide. The next instant the man clambered up the side of the cliff and disappeared.

"One of the smugglers!" whispered Jo Ann, finally recovering her speech. "He was spying on us."

"The one that grabbed the *olla* from you," Florence breathed. "Let's hurry back."

The girls wheeled about and ran back down the stream.

CHAPTER XIII

THE POTTERY WOMAN'S WARNING

ON COMING IN SIGHT of Miss Prudence and Peggy, the two girls checked their steps.

"Let's don't mention seeing that man before Miss Prudence," Jo Ann warned. "No use alarming her."

"All right," Florence agreed. "He didn't act as if he were dangerous, anyway. He ran, too."

"He didn't want us to see him—to recognize him. What's he doing here?"

Florence shook her head, puzzled. "I can't imagine. The pottery woman said they always went on to the city after getting the pottery."

All at once it dawned upon Jo Ann that they had not got any ferns and would soon be back at the pool empty-handed. "Miss Prudence 'll

wonder why we didn't get some ferns," she said. "Let's stop this minute and pull up some."

"All right."

In a few more minutes they had carefully pulled up some clumps of the daintiest maidenhair specimens in sight and had wrapped elephant-ear leaves about their roots to keep the leaf mold from falling off.

When they neared the pool Peggy called out, "What 'd you see to make you come flying back so fast—a rattlesnake or a boa constrictor?"

"Er—neither," Florence replied.

To her and Jo Ann's relief Miss Prudence asked quickly, "Are there really boa constrictors around here? Did you ever see one here?"

"Not right here," Florence replied guardedly.

"Close here?"

"Well—fifty miles or so to the south."

"Hop on your horses and let's go this minute." Miss Prudence tapped her boot against her mount's flank and started riding down the path.

In a few minutes the three girls were following.

After Miss Prudence had gone out of hearing distance, Peggy rode over close to Jo Ann and demanded, "What did you girls see to scare you that way?"

Jo Ann leaned over and whispered, "One of the smugglers!"

Peggy gave a little sudden start that made her horse quiver responsively. "Gol-ly!" she ejaculated. "What 'd he come up here for?"

"That's what Florence and I want to know."

By the time the girls had reached the house, Miss Prudence had dismounted and had gone inside.

As they were walking along the corridor to their room Maria hurried out of the kitchen, an excited gleam in her black eyes.

After a swift glance around to assure herself that Miss Prudence was not in sight she called to Florence in a low voice and motioned for all three of them to come there. As they drew near

she went on excitedly, "There is a woman here from San Geronimo to see you. She say she has something to tell the señoritas who bought her *ollas* a few days back. It is very important, she say."

"A woman from San Geronimo to——" Florence checked her flow of Spanish to relay the message in English to Peggy and Jo Ann.

"She must think it's important to come 'way up here," Jo Ann murmured to Florence as they followed Maria and Peggy into the kitchen. "Do you suppose it could be something about those——"

Before she could finish her sentence, they were inside the kitchen. There sitting beside the door talking to José was the woman from whom Jo Ann had bought the pottery.

On seeing Jo and Florence the woman rose and hurried over to meet them. With her words tumbling over each other in her excitement, she began talking to Florence. So rapid was her Spanish that Jo Ann could catch only a few

words now and then. One thing she was sure of, however, was that the woman was frightened. But why? She could stand the suspense no longer and broke in, "What is it, Florence? What's the trouble?"

Florence turned and explained quickly to her and Peggy, "She says she heard the smugglers threaten to get even with you and me."

Jo Ann's eyes flew open, but she repressed the frightened exclamation on the tip of her tongue.

"Her oldest girl overheard one of the men tell the other that they'd find out at Pedro's store where we lived," Florence went on; "then that he'd drive on with the load of pottery and let him wait around here for a while."

"So that's why that man's here—to get even with us!" Jo Ann exclaimed. "That means we'll have to be extremely careful for a few days. Did she say when the other man 'd be back at the village?"

"No, but I'll ask her."

After questioning her closely Florence relayed

her answers to the girls. "She doesn't know. Says she thinks he'll come one day soon—maybe about this time next week."

"The vague *mañana,*" Peggy summed up. "That means we'll be sitting on top of a volcano for no telling how long."

"I'm so thankful we know of the volcano's existence," Jo Ann replied. She smiled over at the woman with a *"Muchas gracias.* You have been very kind to walk all this way to tell us about the man."

Florence, too, joined in thanking her, then began talking to the anxious-faced Maria. She could see she was worried even more than they themselves. "Don't worry, Maria. José won't let anything happen to us. Will you, José?"

"No, no, Miss Florencita. I will take care of you. But you and Miss Jo and Miss Peggy must be very careful. Stay here at the house unless I am with you. Shall I tell Mr. Eldridge about this?"

"No—well, not yet, anyway." Jo Ann put in

hastily. She must get the information to the mystery man, and if she stayed a prisoner in this house all the time, she couldn't get the chance. Mr. Eldridge might not even want her and the girls and Miss Prudence to go to the city, if he knew about this man's threat.

"José, you haven't gone after the mail yet, have you?" Florence asked.

José shook his head. "I am leaving soon."

"Get a burro so this woman can ride home. She must be very tired. I'm sure Mr. Eldridge will not object."

"*Bien.* I get the burro." He gestured to the woman. "Come with me."

"Wait just a minute, José," spoke up Jo Ann. "I want to give her something for her children."

She ran to her room and reappeared in a moment carrying a large box of caramels. She handed them to the woman, saying, "Here are some *dulces* for your children. We will come back next week for some more *ollas*. You will have some ready then?"

The woman nodded.

Both Maria and the girls felt relieved after the woman and José had gone without Miss Prudence's seeing her.

"I'd have had to tell Miss Prudence everything from A to Z about that woman if she'd seen her," declared Jo Ann. She turned to Maria. "You must not let Miss Prudence know anything about what this woman said. *Sabe?*"

"No—I will not. I know nothing," Maria replied with emphasis, then shrugging her shoulders added, "Miss Prudencia no speak the Spanish. I no speak the English."

"Even if they did speak the same language, Maria wouldn't confide in her," Jo Ann thought. "They can't understand each other. Neither one knows how good and kind the other is. Why is it that women living under the same roof are so often antagonistic to each other?"

Almost the same moment Miss Prudence entered the kitchen, gave Maria a few orders, with Florence as interpreter, then added in a sus-

picious tone, "I noticed a Mexican woman just leaving the house with a box in her hands. What did Maria give her?"

"Nothing," Florence replied quickly. "Jo Ann gave her a box of caramels for her children. She's the woman Jo Ann bought the jars from. I'm going to get some more from her and from the other villagers and ship them to my friend in St. Louis, who has a curio shop."

When Miss Prudence changed the subject to a discussion of the menu for supper, all three girls were relieved.

CHAPTER XIV

JO ANN'S SEARCH

IT WAS NOT till after they had gone to bed that night that the girls had an opportunity to talk over the woman's story and Jo Ann's and Florence's discovery of the smuggler's presence.

"I'm certainly glad you had my bed put in your room," Florence remarked, reaching over across the narrow space that separated her bed from the girls' double one and patting Jo Ann's hand. "I'd be scared to sleep in one of these huge old rooms by myself—especially knowing about that smuggler's being around here."

"I'm as tall as he is, so I'm not scared of him," grinned Jo Ann. "If I were as small and lilylike and fragile-looking as you, I might be uneasy."

"Stop teasing me that way," laughed Florence,

"or I'll roll over between you two for protection."

Just as they were about to drop off to sleep, Jo Ann murmured drowsily, "If Miss Prudence dares to come in and wake me up early in the morning with 'we'll have to get an early start'—at something or other, I'm—I'm going to——" She hesitated.

"I'm going to what?" jibed Peggy.

"I'm going to fire my pillow at her, then turn over and go back to sleep."

Peggy giggled. "Uh-huh! I see you firing a pillow at her."

As it happened, Miss Prudence did enter their room early the next morning to waken them, but instead of hurling a pillow Jo Ann listened gladly to her plan for an "early start."

"Going to the city—this morning?" she repeated, wide awake as soon as the phrase "going to the city" had entered her brain. "That's fine! Sure we'll be ready by the time you are." Seeing that Peggy was sufficiently awake now to take in

the plan for a trip to the city, she asked, "You'll be ready, won't you, Peg?"

"Yes, indeed. Reach over and wake Florence. Tweak her ear or her nose."

Florence protested vigorously at this manner of being wakened but quickly subsided when Jo Ann told her about the trip.

An hour later they were dressed and mounted on their horses, as were Carlitos and Miss Prudence. José tied the two bags to his saddle, which were the only pieces of luggage they were taking, since they were to stay only one night.

"Remember, Carlitos," his uncle said smilingly on telling him good-bye, "you'll be the man of the party after you reach Jitters' House. That's as far as José 'll go, you know."

When they reached Jitters' House, José placed the bags in the car while the girls and Miss Prudence changed from their riding clothes into outfits more suitable for wear in the city. Miss Prudence was neatness itself in her sheer black dress, while the three girls looked fresh and lovely in

their linen suits and crisp dainty blouses, topped off by pert little hats.

"I'm so glad the band will play on the Plaza tonight," Peggy remarked after she had slipped into the front seat beside Jo Ann, who was at the wheel.

"I'm glad, too, but not for that reason," Jo Ann replied. "You want to promenade, while I want to watch for——" She left her sentence unfinished, but Peggy knew that it was the mystery man for whom she would be looking.

When they neared the shack where the pottery woman lived, Jo Ann looked eagerly to see if there were any signs of the smugglers or their car. "Nothing doing," she said finally.

On nearing the city Florence took the wheel on account of her knowledge of the city. After eating a late lunch, they started out on their shopping tour to buy draperies and other materials.

Everywhere she went, whether in the car or

afoot, Jo Ann kept looking for the mystery man. Every stalwart male of the mystery man's approximate height whom she caught sight of she studied intently, hoping that it would be he. She begrudged the time spent inside shops buying cretonnes and draperies, as she felt she would never find him in such places.

"Maybe he'll be on that same corner of the Plaza again," she comforted herself later that evening after a fruitless search.

As soon as the band began playing, all three girls made straight for the Plaza and began promenading along with the gay groups of Mexican girls, while Miss Prudence and Carlitos sat watching from a bench on the outside of the square.

As before, Jo Ann had eyes only for stalwart onlookers who might turn out to be the mystery man. Peggy, however, kept on the inside of the line.

When they had strolled about the square the second time, Peggy suddenly uttered an excla-

mation of surprise, "There he is! There he is!"

"Where? Where?" Jo Ann asked eagerly.

"There—see? That tall, dark-haired, handsome boy with the big black eyes!"

"Oh, gosh!" Jo Ann ejaculated disgustedly when she realized Peggy had not meant the mystery man but the tall youth with whom she had exchanged smiles the other time she had promenaded.

She was still more discouraged and disgusted after a whole evening of strolling around the Plaza with no sign of the mystery man.

"I'm afraid this trip's going to be a complete flop, after all," she remarked to Peggy. "I might as well have gone to the hotel when Miss Prudence and Carlitos did."

"Miss Prudence was an angel to let us stay so long, wasn't she?" Peggy smiled.

Jo Ann nodded indifferently. Peggy might be thrilled over exchanging smiles with a handsome Mexican boy, but not she.

The next morning, as soon as they left the hotel to finish their shopping, Jo Ann began to search for the mystery man again, but in vain.

"The last thing we'll do is to go to the market," Miss Prudence announced on leaving the department store a little later.

"Let's go to the big market near the center of the city," Florence suggested. "You can buy every kind of fruit and vegetable imaginable there."

"The mystery man wouldn't be doing any marketing," Jo Ann thought wearily. "It 'll be no use to look for him there."

All at once a sudden thought struck her. If he should have any inkling about the smugglers hiding the dope or gold, or whatever stuff it was, in jars and vases, he might stay around the pottery booths where the pottery could be bought so cheaply. She brightened visibly at this idea.

As soon as they reached the market, she left the others with Miss Prudence in front of one of the vegetable stands and wandered back to where

she had remembered seeing the pottery booth. Eagerly her eyes roved here, there, and all around the booths near by. That broad-shouldered man standing—— She caught her breath. It *was* the mystery man!

"He's alive! He's alive!" rang through her mind; then the words, "Now's my chance to talk to him."

All at once it occurred to her that it would be an embarrassing situation all around if Miss Prudence should appear while she was talking to this stranger. "Before I say a word to him, I'll slip back to tell Florence to keep Miss Prudence and Carlitos away from the pottery booth for a while," she thought quickly.

No sooner had this plan entered her mind than she hurried to Florence's side, whispered a few words, and waited only long enough to catch her emphatic "All right," then rushed back to the pottery booth as fast as she could zigzag her way through the crowded passageways.

When she caught sight of the stalwart figure

again, she gave a sigh of relief and hastened over toward him.

As she drew near, the man shot a piercing glance at her, then a gleam of unmistakable recognition shone in his keen gray eyes.

"He hasn't forgotten me," she thought. "That makes it easier."

She began speaking in a low voice: "You're trying to catch a band of smugglers, aren't you?"

The man gave an involuntary start but controlled his features. "What makes you think that?" he countered.

"From what I overheard you say in the hotel —I didn't mean to eavesdrop—and from a bit of information I got from—" she started to say "from a coast guard" but changed to—"from somebody else."

"Was that somebody else a smuggler?" he asked in a carefully light tone.

"No—no." There was a hint of impatience in Jo Ann's voice. He was trying to throw her off the track. She'd go straight to the point now.

"I've accidentally run across some information about some smugglers that may help you," she said.

An alert expression replaced the half smile on the man's face as he asked, "What is that you think you've discovered?"

Quickly Jo Ann recounted her and Florence's discovery of the hidden car with the pottery and the baskets near the border, the smugglers' conversation, and their seeing them again at the village, ending with, "I'm sure that must 've been gold in that jar I lifted. It was so very heavy."

"It looks as if you've discovered one set of them," he said thoughtfully. "They're only two of a large gang, though. The ringleaders stay on the other side."

"Was it the ringleaders you'd been pursuing in Texas?" she asked, low-voiced.

He nodded. "Dangerous men they are. If we can catch them we can break up the gang. I'm going to keep an eye open for cars loaded with baskets and pottery. If I can follow them to the

border I may be able to catch the leaders. Tell me exactly where you discovered that hidden car."

Jo Ann went on to describe as accurately as possible the location of the gully in which she and Florence had found the car.

"Do you happen to know the license number of their car?"

"Yes." As she gave the number, he jotted it down in a notebook.

"Anything else about the car to distinguish it?"

Jo Ann went on to tell of the battered places in the radiator.

"And now give me a detailed description of the men."

Racking her brain for every item that would be helpful, she described their appearance and clothes, from the braided leather strips about their sombreros to a peculiar squint in the left eye of the taller man.

"Good. You're a close observer. I wish you

could find out exactly when they'll leave San Geronimo next week. If you could, I could wire my men across the border. Maybe together we might round up the ringleaders. If I don't get them soon, they'll——"

He halted abruptly, but Jo Ann knew instinctively that he had been going to add "get me." That was what he had said over the telephone in the hotel. She must—must get him that information if possible.

"I don't want to mix you girls up in this affair, and if you can't get the information without endangering yourselves, don't do it."

Jo Ann's eyes began to gleam determinedly. "I'll get it. As soon as we find out exactly when the men 're starting from the village, I'll get word to you. If I can't come, I'll write you—but where?"

The man took a card from his pocket and after writing on it handed it to her, saying, "Write me in care of general delivery. I had decided to leave in the morning, but now, since you've given

me this very valuable information, I'll wait till I hear from you. If you should come back to the city, you'll find me somewhere around this pottery booth in the daytime and near the Plaza at night."

Jo Ann was about to ask some more questions when she caught a glimpse of Miss Prudence and the girls coming down the crowded aisle. "I've got to go this instant," she said and hurried around back of the booth, meeting them in the main aisle.

"I hadn't missed you till a moment ago," Miss Prudence remarked to her. "What 've you been buying?"

"Nothing—yet. I want to get a pair of Mexican sandals to use for bedroom slippers. Have you seen any here?"

"Yes; they're at a booth on the extreme left," Florence put in quickly. "I'll show you. Come on, Peg. We'll meet you and Carlitos at that first fruit booth, Miss Prudence, in a few minutes."

CHAPTER XV

ANXIOUS MOMENTS

As soon as Miss Prudence and Carlitos were out of hearing distance, Florence asked eagerly, "Did you get to talk to the man, Jo?"

"Yes, and he was glad to get the information. He gave me his card. See? His name's Mr. Andrews, and I'm to write to him here in care of general delivery. I'll tell you all about it when we get back to the hotel."

In spite of this promise Jo Ann did not get an opportunity to recount this conversation till hours later.

After purchasing the sandals with much bargaining in true Mexican style, Jo Ann and the girls waited for some time at the fruit booth for Miss Prudence and Carlitos.

"I wonder what's happened to Miss Prudence

and Carlitos to keep them so long," Florence said finally.

"I know Miss Prudence's not delayed by carrying on a conversation in Spanish with anyone," smiled Peggy. "She's like me—about the only words she knows are *cuanto* and *adios.*"

"Perhaps she's bargaining by the gesture method," added Jo Ann.

Several minutes later an anxious-faced Miss Prudence came hurrying up and asked, "Where's Carlitos? Have you seen him?"

"No," all three replied.

"Well, he's disappeared—was right by my side one minute—then the next he was gone. I've searched all around the market but can't find him."

"You've just missed each other in the crowds," Florence replied comfortingly. "You stay right here, and we three 'll separate and go in different directions and meet here again. We'll find him."

Noticing an empty chair near by, Jo Ann moved the chair over to Miss Prudence's side

and said, "Sit here and rest. I'm sure we girls can find him."

Wearily Miss Prudence sank down in the chair, and the girls started off to find Carlitos. Each took a different section of the building to search and wound in and out the maze of crowded passageways that divided the scores of booths.

After Jo Ann had made the rounds of her allotted part twice without seeing Carlitos, she started back to Miss Prudence, hoping that the other girls had found him. Peggy arrived almost the same moment, but she, too, was alone.

The worried frown on Miss Prudence's face deepened on seeing they had not found Carlitos.

"Florence 'll find him: she's more familiar with this building," Jo Ann told her more confidently than she felt. Into her mind had darted the recollection of the harrowing experience they had once had when Carlitos had been kidnaped by the treacherous Mexican foreman. Just suppose he'd been kidnaped again! That one of those

smugglers had stolen him to get even with her and Florence. That pottery woman had said they had threatened to get even some way.

Just as she had come to this painful point in her thoughts, Florence appeared—alone.

"No sign of him anywhere," she announced. "One man told me he'd seen a boy of his description going out a side door."

"Did he say this boy was alone?" Jo Ann asked anxiously.

"He didn't say." Florence had caught Jo Ann's emphasis on the word alone, and her heart began thumping rapidly. Did Jo Ann think someone might have kidnaped him again? The smugglers! Could they—— "I'll go back and ask that man if Carlitos was alone," she said.

She hurried back to find the man and returned a few moments later, saying in a disappointed voice, "He said he didn't notice whether he was alone or not."

"Maybe he got tired of waiting here and went back to the hotel," Jo Ann suggested.

"He might have," Miss Prudence replied. "Florence, tell the woman at this booth"—she gestured to the booth just back of them—"that if she sees an American boy looking for somebody to tell him we've gone to the hotel."

After another round of searching they left the market and drove back to the hotel. Florence parked the car near the side entrance, saying, "We'd better leave the car here handy, as we'll be leaving as soon as we can find Carlitos."

They hurried into the hotel, looked about the lobby, and then went up to their rooms. Carlitos was nowhere to be seen.

"I declare, I'm getting more and more worried—and thoroughly exasperated," Miss Prudence announced after looking in the last room.

"Wait here, Miss Prudence, and I'll run down to the lobby and ask the clerks at the desk if they've seen him," Jo Ann said hurriedly. "He might 've left some message there."

"Well—I'll finish my packing while I'm waiting."

"I'll go with you, Jo," offered Florence and Peggy together.

On inquiring at the desk Jo Ann found that neither of the clerks had seen him.

As she was starting to turn away, one of the clerks summoned the porter who stood at the front entrance and asked him if he had seen Carlitos. To the girls' delight the porter nodded and replied that he thought he had seen him talking to a newsboy about half an hour ago.

The girls' faces brightened on hearing this, Jo Ann's especially, as she immediately recalled how fascinated Carlitos had been with a Mexican newsboy the first day they had arrived. After a quick *"Muchas gracias"* to the porter, the girls hurried out to the street, Jo Ann in the lead.

When they had walked only a short distance down the street, Jo Ann heard a newsboy's shrill cry in broken English. "Carlitos's voice!" she exclaimed. "I hear him!"

She rushed around the corner and stared across the street. There, a bag of newspapers

slung across his shoulder, stood Carlitos selling a paper to an American.

"Can you beat that!" Peggy ejaculated, catching sight of Carlitos at the same time.

"Of all things!" Florence gasped.

They hastened across the street to his side. He greeted them half joyfully, half sheepishly; then, with a gesture to the grinning little Mexican newsboy beside him, he said, "I sell lots of papers for Diego. He say I very good 'cause I can speak de Spanish and de English."

"You may be good at selling papers, Carlitos," Jo Ann answered, "but you should 've told your aunt Prudence where you were going. She's been worried stiff about you."

"Worried stiff—stiff," he repeated, puzzled.

"Badly worried—*mucho*. She's been afraid something terrible had happened to you. Come on to the hotel. We're leaving for the mine in a few minutes."

Reluctantly Carlitos parted with his newsboy friend.

As soon as they had brought Carlitos to the hotel room and Miss Prudence had delivered him a strong lecture, she urged them all to hurry and pack their few belongings and leave at once. "You know it's a long hard trip to the mine, and I certainly don't want to be riding horseback on that steep, rocky mountain trail after dark."

"We don't either," said Jo Ann quickly. "Florence and I had one experience riding in the mountains in the dark and through a terrible storm, too, and we don't want another, do we, Florence?"

"No, indeed."

After leaving the city Florence slipped over to let Jo Ann drive. "You're a better chauffeur than I am and always make better time. We must get back to the mine before dark, especially since we saw——"

She left her sentence unfinished, but Jo Ann knew that she meant the smuggler they had seen near the mine.

When they finally reached Jitters' House in the late afternoon, they found José waiting for them.

"I wonder why he happened to come?" Peggy remarked curiously on seeing him standing beside the shed. The next instant she realized that he must be uneasy because of the pottery woman's account of the smugglers' threats. "He's come as an extra protection for us," she thought.

"It's good of him," Jo Ann put in, and Florence added, "He's always thoughtful and kind."

Carlitos was delighted to see him. Another male was a welcome change after having to stay with women for two days. That was one reason he had felt that he must slip off with the newsboy awhile, though he couldn't have explained that in words. He was eager to tell José all about his trip, too.

Even Miss Prudence expressed appreciation of José's coming, adding, "He's as thoughtful as he can be."

Jo Ann was the first one of the group to finish changing into riding clothes. She hurried back to the shed where José was still waiting, as she was anxious to know how things had been running at the mine, and especially if he had seen anything of the smuggler hanging around. She had described the smuggler so carefully to him that he would be able to recognize him.

"Have you seen anything of that strange man while we've been gone?" she asked him.

To her relief José shook his head. "No."

"Everything all right?"

This time José shook his head more emphatically. "Ah—there was much trouble at the mine today." With many excited gestures he went on to tell her that one of the loaded tramcars had got loose and had crashed down the mountain side, tearing up the track and causing much trouble. "Very much trouble," he repeated, shaking his head.

"What caused the car to break loose?"

José shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"That I do not know. Me no *sabe*. Señor Eldridge say he no understand."

All at once the thought flashed into her mind that perhaps the smuggler was at the bottom of this accident. Maybe that was his way of getting even.

CHAPTER XVI

DOWN THE MINE SHAFT

THE NEXT THREE DAYS were busy ones for the girls. Miss Prudence had bought scores of yards of gay-colored cretonnes and other materials, and she now set all three to work making couch and pillow covers and draperies.

"I've got to have draperies to hide the iron bars at the bedroom windows," she had said. "I don't like to see those iron bars. They make me feel as if I'm in prison."

When she escorted the girls to her bedroom and showed them the heaps of materials, Jo Ann remarked with a whimsical smile, "I didn't realize what I was getting us into when I suggested brightening up this house with draperies and cushions. It looks as if we'll be running the sew-

ing machine instead of Jitters for the next week or two."

Florence and Peggy both laughed. They knew Jo Ann did not like any task that kept her in the house, and especially one of the sitting-still kind, like sewing.

" 'Outdoor action and plenty of it,' is Jo Ann's slogan," Peggy explained a moment later for Miss Prudence's benefit. "She says sitting still and sewing make all her muscles feel cramped and her head ache and her mind tired."

"Well, it does," Jo Ann defended. "I feel as if I'm getting petrified. I'd rather climb mountains any time."

"I'll let you run the machine, then," Miss Prudence spoke up briskly. "That 'll keep your feet moving up and down as if you're climbing."

"A poor substitute," Jo Ann returned, smiling.

"Before you begin sewing, I'll give you an active job that 'll bring into use more of your muscles—measuring windows. Be sure to get the

exact length. Nothing looks worse than draperies that 're too short."

After Jo Ann had finished measuring windows, she set to work basting and stitching the hems in the draperies. By this time her thoughts had wandered from sewing to the mystery man and the smugglers. Was that smuggler still lurking around the mine and had the other one reached the border without being caught? And was the mystery man still safe and sound? She must get word someway to him when the smugglers were to make their next trip, so he could follow them. If only he could catch those ringleaders and break up that gang!

So engrossed was she in these thoughts that she did not heed Peggy's sudden outburst of laughter several minutes later till Florence called out a merry, "Jo! Will you look what you've done! You've hemmed all your draperies upside down, so that the parrots or parrakeets —or whatever kind of birds they are in the design—are all standing on their heads."

"They'll look comical with their tails perpetually in the air," giggled Peggy. "I'm getting dizzy already even at the thought of those poor birds hanging head downward that way."

"Oh dear!" groaned the discomfited Jo Ann on viewing her mistake. "Now I've got to rip out every hem. Oh, woe is me!"

"I'll help you," Florence offered, taking one of the draperies from her.

"Next time concentrate on your sewing instead of on the mystery man and those——" Peggy stopped talking abruptly on seeing Miss Prudence enter the room.

As soon as José came to the house that evening, Jo Ann slipped to the kitchen to ask him if he had seen the smuggler hanging around the mine.

At his reply that he had not, Jo Ann felt relieved till the next moment, when he added, "We have much trouble at the mine today. No get out much ore." He went on to explain that the tramcar wrecked the previous day had torn up the

track badly and that there had been trouble with some of the mine machinery.

"Have they found out who wrecked the car?" she asked.

"No. One man told me he saw Luis, a bad workman *El Señor* discharged last week, near the track before the wreck." José shrugged his shoulders. "I do not know who did it. Maybe it was Luis—maybe it was the strange man you saw."

"Why did Mr. Eldridge discharge this Luis?"

"He steal ore."

As Miss Prudence entered the kitchen just then and sat down, Jo Ann could not question José further. She left the room wondering if after all she had not been wrong in her surmise about the smuggler's having wrecked the car. He might have become alarmed after she and Florence had seen him and have left immediately. She certainly hoped that was the case.

By the time the girls had finished sewing, Jo Ann was thoroughly weary of staying in the

house. "If I don't get outside for a long horseback ride or a climb up the mountains today, I'll go raving crazy," she said.

Peggy laughed at this exaggerated speech, and Florence remarked smilingly, "Well, by all means let's get out and explore the country this afternoon. I'm fed up with staying inside, too."

"To tell you the truth," Peggy put in, "I've been rather glad to stay inside. Ever since I heard about that smuggler's hanging around here, the house looks good to me."

"Oh, he's gone away by now, surely," Jo Ann answered. "José says no one else has said a word about having seen a stranger around, and in a small camp like this a stranger surely couldn't escape being noticed. I feel sure he's gone back to join the other man. If that man returns for the pottery the same time that he did last week, he'll be back at the village Friday. I've got to get word to the mystery man what day they're starting for the border."

"The woman promised me to save some of the pottery for me, but I want to select the best designs from the entire lot before she sells any of them," Florence put in.

"That means we'll have to go and get the pottery before those men come," Jo Ann remarked. "That suits me to a T. You've already written to your friend in St. Louis that you're sending the pottery in a few days, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, that settles it. We'll go to the village to get the pottery Thursday morning and take it to the city and ship it from there. That 'll give me a fine chance to find out from the woman when the smugglers 're coming and to see the mystery man and tell him when to look out for them."

"I see where you're headed for more trouble," Peggy spoke up. "You'd better keep your fingers out of this whole affair. You're too adventuresome."

Jo Ann half smiled. "Oh, skip it—the lecture,

I mean. Let's get the horses and go for a ride now."

"There's one thing I'd like better than to go for a long ride, and that's to go through the mine," Florence said. "Mr. Eldridge promised me he'd take us through it while I'm here this time. When he comes in to lunch, let's beg him to take us down into it this afternoon."

"Fine!" approved Jo Ann. "I've been eager to see how the *malacate* works now that it's run by electricity."

"What's a *malacate,* and what does it do?" Peggy asked curiously.

"It's a windlass arrangement that draws the ore up out of the mine. A rawhide bag is tied to the end of a long cable and let down into the shaft. Using electricity is a vast improvement over the old way."

"Did the peons have to work the windlass—wind it by hand?" Peggy asked, puzzled.

"No, burros were used for that purpose. But before they used a windlass, back in primitive

times, they made the Indians carry the ore up in bags, and they had to climb all the way up out of the mine on dangerous notched logs for ladders. Many and many of those Indians have fallen into the deep shafts, to their death."

There was silence for a moment; then Florence spoke up: "I have my doubts if Mr. Eldridge 'll take us into the mine in the daytime. The miners are very superstitious about women going into the mine, he said. They think every time a woman goes in, something terrible always happens—an awful explosion or a cave-in, killing one or more of the miners."

Jo Ann nodded understandingly. "That's so. I'd forgotten about that. We'll ask him to take us tonight, then."

As soon as Mr. Eldridge came in to lunch, all three girls greeted him with requests to show them through the mine that night.

"We-ell, I don't know quite what to say to that," he replied slowly. "There've been two peculiar accidents lately that make me somewhat

reluctant to take you down into the mine. Those accidents haven't been accounted for to my satisfaction yet."

"But they were both outside the mine, weren't they?" asked Jo Ann.

"Yes."

"And two days have passed by without any more trouble," Florence added.

Mr. Eldridge smiled. "Well, I might as well say you may go. When three girls pounce upon one poor defenseless man, he has to agree to their plans. There's no night shift working tonight, so this 'll be a good time. Be ready by eight o'clock."

"All right," the girls chorused in reply.

That afternoon the three, accompanied by Carlitos and Miss Prudence, took a long horseback ride over a beautiful mountain trail.

Miss Prudence refused, however, to go with them on their trip to inspect the mine that night or to let Carlitos go. "Carlitos is tired and sleepy from the long ride, and bed's the best place

for him," she said. "I should think you girls would 've had enough exercise, too."

By a quarter of eight the girls were ready and waiting. Knowing that the mine was damp and cold, they had put on their sweaters and heaviest oxfords, and Jo Ann and Peggy had prepared themselves for darkness as well, as they had their flashlights.

When Mr. Eldridge and they reached the shaft, he switched on the electricity to work the *malacate* so they could go down into the mine.

No sooner had the machinery started running than the Mexican night watchman came running to investigate, an alarmed expression on his face. "Ah, it is you!" he exclaimed in a relieved tone on seeing Mr. Eldridge.

Mr. Eldridge smiled. "You are a good watchman, Manuel. I am taking the señoritas down to show them how we mine the ore. Do not tell anyone the señoritas have been in the mine. *Sabe?*"

"*Sí.* I *sabe,*" Manuel replied quickly, knowing at once why *El Señor* had given this order.

"Don't turn off the *malacate*. See that nobody comes near it. Stay close by."

Manuel nodded assent. "I stay here."

"Manuel is the best watchman we've ever had," Mr. Eldridge told the girls. "I can trust him not to go to sleep."

When Jo Ann found herself in the rawhide bag tied at the end of the long cable and being dropped down into the shaft's eerie darkness, she felt a queer sinking sensation at the pit of her stomach, as if she were falling through bottomless space. "It's breath-taking—scary," she thought.

It was with a gasp of relief that she stepped out of the bag and onto the rocky bottom of the shaft. She knew exactly how Peggy felt when she scrambled out of the bag a little later and exclaimed, "Wh-ew! My heart's up here!" She was clutching her throat dramatically.

Together they waited for Florence's descent. By their flashlights' gleam they could see that her eyes were dilated and her lips tightly closed.

"It scared you speechless," grinned Peggy after waiting a moment for her to speak.

Florence nodded and managed a "Took my breath!"

It seemed to all three that of all the cold, damp, terrifying places to work, a silver mine was the worst. Mr. Eldridge led them through low narrow tunnels and into several black, cavernous recesses opening from these passageways and showed them the different mining processes.

Peggy became decidedly nervous on learning that the ore was dynamited down. "There might be some dynamite around here now, and it might explode and blow us into smithereens," she whispered to Jo Ann.

A few minutes later she bumped into something against the wall that made her leap back in haste. When Mr. Eldridge told her it was a dynamite box, her heart began leaping faster than ever.

"He means an empty dynamite box," Jo Ann

explained hastily as her flashlight's beams showed her the ghastly pallor of Peggy's face. "Some miners are using it as an altar," she added comfortingly. "See, there's a picture of the Virgin inside."

"I believe I'm ready to leave this murky gloom and get back up into the good fresh air," Peggy said, her voice still shaky.

"Well, I believe you've seen all the most interesting things." Mr. Eldridge smiled. "We'll go on up."

When they came back to the shaft, to Mr. Eldridge's amazement, the *malacate* was not working. "Now what's the matter!" he exclaimed, annoyed. "I told Manuel to keep the *malacate* running so we could get back."

For several minutes they stood waiting in vain for the cable and bag to appear.

Finally, in an exasperated tone Mr. Eldridge remarked, "Never had anything like this happen before. Can't imagine what's the matter. Manuel's always been so dependable. We may

have to walk all that long distance to the entrance of the workings. And you're all so tired already."

Just then there sounded an excited cry that reverberated uncannily through the shaft.

"Why, that's José's voice!" Jo Ann exclaimed. "What's——"

The next instant the words, "Manuel's—killed!" echoed down to them.

A moment's stunned silence fell; then Mr. Eldridge gasped, "Manuel—killed! Start the *malacate* at once, so we can get up there!"

"No can—the wires all broke," came back the wailing answer.

"Wires broken—and Manuel killed and——" Mr. Eldridge's voice trailed off into silence.

Jo Ann cut in, "José's so excitable! Manuel may have only fainted or been shocked unconscious."

"That's true. All the more reason I must get up there at once. It 'll take us so long to walk to the entrance."

"Can't José attach burros to the *malacate* and pull us up that way?" put in Jo Ann.

"Yes, he could. That 'd take lots less time." Mr. Eldridge called immediately to José to attach the burros to the *malacate* and start it working, ending with the usual, *"Sabe?"*

"Si," José called back. "I go now."

While they were anxiously awaiting for José to start the *malacate,* Mr. Eldridge remarked that he had better go up first to see about Manuel. "I hate to go ahead of you, though."

"Don't worry about us," Jo Ann said, more confidently than she felt. "There's nothing here to harm us."

"Nothing at all," agreed Florence in a voice that quivered unconvincingly.

Just then Peggy's hand clutched Jo Ann's convulsively. "Poor Peg's scared stiff at the idea of his leaving us," thought Jo Ann as she grasped the cold hand in a comforting pressure. Her mind, however, flew back to Manuel. Surely he couldn't have been killed. He must 've fainted.

But he was so strong-looking. What could have happened in that short time? If only José would hurry faster and let down that cable. "Oh, surely Manuel can't be dead!" she kept repeating to herself.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE DARKNESS

AFTER WHAT SEEMED to Jo Ann an interminable time the cable appeared, and Mr. Eldridge was pulled up the shaft.

"I feel better now that he's up safely," Jo Ann said, breathing more freely.

"I don't know which I dread worse—going up in that awful bag or staying down here in this terrible dark," Peggy groaned.

Noticing that Peggy's flashlight was not on, Florence asked, "Why don't you switch on your flashlight? That'll help some."

"It won't turn on. When I bumped against that dynamite box, I got so scared I dropped it. It must've got broken then."

So worried over Manuel was Jo Ann that she paid little heed to Peggy's continued laments. If

only this awful suspense about him was over! Surely he must be only unconscious. If he were, when they got out they could help give him first aid. She'd had first-aid training in her scout work. "I wish I could go up first and see if I could do anything for him," she told herself.

Just then she heard Peggy say, "I believe I'll go up first. I can't stand this creepy darkness. I keep thinking that smuggler's hidden down here and——"

"Peggy's so upset and nervous, she'd better go up first," Jo Ann admitted to herself reluctantly. Aloud she said, "All right, Peg, you go next. See what you can do to help Manuel."

"But, Jo, Manuel's dead!" she wailed.

Jo Ann shook her head as she answered, "I can't believe that he is."

Shuddering, Peggy went on: "I'd planned to wait for you two before I took a step when I got up. The lights are off up there. Whoever killed Manuel must 've cut off the lights."

"Mr. Eldridge 'll have some kind of a light,

surely. If Manuel's breathing—I can't help feeling that he is—do everything you can for him."

Soon the quivering Peggy was inside the bag and being slowly pulled up the shaft. When, however, she had ascended only a short way, something went wrong with the cable, and the bag hung suspended—motionless.

Peggy's terrified shriek echoed and re-echoed through the shaft.

"Horrors!" gasped Florence. "I hope the cable's not stuck. Sometimes it 'll get stuck that way for an hour or more."

"You'll be all right in a minute," Jo Ann called up to Peggy. "Don't get scared." In a low voice she added to Florence, "I hope I'm telling the whole truth."

To their vast relief, in a few minutes the bag began to move upward once more.

"Thank goodness!" Florence ejaculated. "Which one of us had better go up next? I'd like to, but if you——"

Jo Ann's impulse was to speak up, "Let me

go," but, instead, she replied, "You go on. I have a flashlight, and you haven't."

Several minutes later, with mingled feelings of relief and fear, she watched Florence being pulled up till she was above the reach of the flashlight's beam. All was eerie blackness now. The shadows began to take on weird ghostlike shapes. Was that a man crouching over there? The smuggler?

An involuntary shudder shivered through her body. She must not let her imagination run riot this way. She steadied her lower lip to prevent its trembling.

At last the bag loomed into view, and after an anxious wait she got inside it. Slowly—painfully slowly she began to ascend.

When she was about halfway up, the cable suddenly spun around, knocking the bag against the rocky side of the shaft. She felt a stinging sensation in her right arm as it struck the rocks. Clutching her flashlight more tightly and cringing with pain, she lifted her arm to protect her

light. It was too late. The flashlight had been broken—badly smashed.

In another moment she had forgotten about her injured arm and broken flashlight in a more serious trouble. The bag was stuck—not moving either up or down. She stifled a shriek that was threatening to escape her lips. No wonder Peggy had cried out. And it was worse this time. There was utter darkness below. No one to call up comfortingly from the bottom of the shaft. No one at the top either. Both girls were probably hovering over Manuel now, if he—— Had they found by now that he really was dead?

She must shut out that terrifying picture from her mind. It seemed, though, to be outlined against the darkness in a glaring light that refused to be blotted out. How long would she have to hang this way in midair, seeing this horrible picture?

"Better to hang suspended than to be dashed to the bottom on those rocks," she told herself. "Peg was in the same plight, and now she's up

safely. But then she was stuck only two or three minutes, and you've been here ten or fifteen at least," she reminded herself discouragedly.

Endless ages dragged on, it seemed to her, as she hung there. Would this suspense never end? Had anything happened to José? Had he been killed, too?

At last, when her hopes had almost ebbed away, she felt the bag moving upward. Actually going up now. As she neared the top and drew in deep breaths of the fresh air, a great wave of gratitude swept over her.

Once safely out on the ground, she began feeling her way through the darkness toward the light on her left. José hurried up just then with a lantern in his hand.

"Tell me about Manuel—he is not dead, is he?" she asked him quickly.

"I think he is. He look dead when I see him," José answered brokenly. "That wicked Luis—he knock him down. I catch Luis and tie him to a tree." He gestured to the right.

"Luis! That miner Mr. Eldridge discharged for stealing?"

"Yes."

"But why did he want to hurt Manuel? Manuel didn't discharge him."

"Manuel tell him to keep away." José went on to explain that Luis had thrown a crowbar back of the switchboard, so the *malacate* would not work, and that when Manuel had tried to grab him Luis had knocked him down. There was a triumphant tone in his voice as he added, "I catch Luis. I fix him."

"How did it happen that you came up here? You didn't come with us."

José hesitated a moment, then replied, "I saw you come up here, and I think *El Señor* need me. He tell me to take Luis down to the big house now. I leave you now."

On nearing the *malacate* Jo Ann could see Manuel's inert figure lying on the ground, Mr. Eldridge bending over him, and the girls standing near by.

"Is he——" Jo Ann left her question unfinished, but both girls knew what she meant.

"He's still alive," Florence whispered. "Unconscious. I could feel his pulse. His skin is a clammy cold. I wish I had some hot-water bottles to put around him."

"Thank goodness he's still alive!" Jo Ann exclaimed softly.

"We've put our sweaters over him," Peggy added, gesturing to the sweaters on Manuel's body. "I can't think of anything else to do."

"We might heat some rocks or bricks and put around him," Jo Ann suggested eagerly.

"Good idea," approved Mr. Eldridge, who had overheard her. "I'll help you. We must do something to help him, since it 'll be hours before we can get a doctor here."

They hurried about gathering wood and soon built a small fire on some flat stones. As soon as the stones were hot, they pushed them out of the fire, then covered them with some old pieces of a torn blanket.

"We must be absolutely certain these rocks 'll not burn him," Jo Ann cautioned. "Persons suffering from shock are more easily burned than usual. My scout book said never to put anything hot next the patient till it could be held against your face for a minute without feeling too hot." She tested each stone before passing it on to Mr. Eldridge to place next to the unconscious figure.

After that was done, Jo Ann began rubbing his arms toward the body.

"Why's she doing that?" queried Peggy in a low voice.

"I think it's to restore the circulation."

When Jo Ann was still rubbing his arms, Manuel's eyelids began to flicker.

"He's beginning to become conscious," Mr. Eldridge said, low-voiced. "As soon as José comes back he and I'll carry him down to the house. There isn't any serious bleeding, so I feel sure it 'll be safe to carry him now. We'll have to make a stretcher."

No sooner had he finished speaking than Jo Ann dashed away, returning shortly with two poles. Mr. Eldridge immediately jerked off his coat and pulled the poles through the sleeves, then tied a piece of blanket securely to the poles also. By that time José was back from taking Luis to the house. With Mr. Eldridge's help José tenderly lifted the injured man upon the improvised stretcher and set off down the trail, careful to hold the poles as steady as possible.

The girls followed close behind, Jo Ann bringing up the rear.

"Do you know where José took the prisoner?" Peggy asked Jo Ann.

"Yes. To our house."

"Gracious! That's awful. I'll never be able to sleep a wink tonight, knowing he's in the same house that we are."

"It's the safest place to keep him in the camp. The walls are as thick as a regular prison's, and there 're iron bars to all the windows. Besides, José 'll guard him."

"It makes me shivery all over to know he's under our roof."

"I don't believe even a Houdini could escape from that house," Jo Ann assured her. "You'll be safe. Don't worry."

CHAPTER XVIII

JO ANN FINDS A WAY

ALTHOUGH PEGGY had vowed she would never be able to close her eyes all night with that prisoner in the house, she was so tired that she was not long in dropping off to sleep. Exhausted by their exciting experiences, all three slept till late the next morning.

"For a welcome change," as Florence expressed it afterwards, Miss Prudence had not wanted to get an early start to go somewhere or to do some housework, and so had allowed them to drowse on undisturbed.

The first thing Jo Ann saw on waking was the smiling Maria carrying in a tray of food.

As Maria set the tray on the small table between the beds, she remarked, "Miss Prudencia say you may have your breakfast in bed. You

were so brave—so good to help Manuel last night."

"Muchas gracias," replied Jo Ann, eying delightedly the golden toast, oranges, crisp brown bacon, and cups of steaming chocolate.

Peggy and Florence chimed in with their thanks; then Peggy put in quickly, "Florence, ask her if the prisoner is still in the house."

Florence promptly relayed this question.

Maria nodded. *"Sí.* José watch good all night." She went on to add that José had just come into the kitchen and had said he wanted to tell the señoritas something about Luis.

"Don't you know what it is?" Florence asked curiously.

"No. Miss Prudencia send me out of the kitchen then, and José leave."

"Is José going to the village to get the *rurales* to come after Luis this morning?"

"Sí."

"Tell him when he comes back that we want to go with him. Tell him to have the horses ready for us."

With a nod of assent Maria left the room.

Jo Ann began eating an orange, a thoughtful expression in her dark brown eyes. A moment later she remarked, "I shouldn't wonder if that Luis was hired by the smuggler to do all the damage he could."

"Why, what makes you think that?" asked Peggy in surprise. "You haven't seen them together, have you?"

"No."

"And you've never seen that smuggler here again since that first time, have you?"

"No."

"Then why this sudden idea?"

"Because two men in the same small mining camp who have a grievance against the mine owners would be likely to get together. They'd have a common interest—to get even."

Peggy smiled. "Oh, you Miss Sherlock!"

"Your mentioning the smuggler reminds me that the pottery woman said she'd have the pottery ready for us today," put in Florence. "I

want you girls to help me select the finest pieces as samples to send to my friend in St. Louis for her curio shop. It 'll be quite a job to get them packed right. I was in hopes José would have time to help me pack them. His having to get the officers this morning might interfere."

"I don't think it will," Jo Ann replied. "Do you think you could get a crate in the village and pack your pottery there?"

"I doubt it. They've never shipped any pottery by train. I believe I'll take the pottery to Jitters' House, and José can hunt up something around there to make a crate out of."

By the time the girls had finished eating and had dressed in riding outfits, José was waiting for them with the horses.

As soon as they came out, Florence asked José what it was that he had to tell them about the prisoner, Luis. After he had explained in a rapid flow of Spanish, Florence passed the news to the eager Jo Ann and Peggy. "He said Luis had told him that some strange man had promised to

give him a few *pesos* if he would wreck the mine machinery. He believes, judging by Luis's description, that this stranger was one of the men the pottery woman warned us about."

"So I guessed right," Jo Ann spoke up.

"It doesn't seem fair for Luis to get a prison sentence and for the smuggler to go free," Peggy said, low-voiced, to Jo Ann.

"Both of those smugglers 're going to get caught yet—you'll see." Jo Ann's head bobbed up and down emphatically.

"Does that mean you're going to try to catch them?" Peggy asked, an anxious note in her voice.

"Wait and see," Jo Ann replied teasingly as she leaped on her horse.

On reaching the village José went in search of the officers while the girls drove to the pottery woman's shack to buy the *ollas* and vases.

With the greatest care Florence, with the girls' help, selected the most artistic designs and shapes from the piles of pottery. "If my friend

likes these pieces as well 's I do," she said, "I know she'll buy regularly from these villagers and take a large per cent of their output. They'll get ever so much more money, too, than they have been getting. We'll be doing them a good turn, as well as my friend."

At Jo Ann's urging Florence then began adroitly questioning the woman about when she was expecting the men to come after the pottery this week.

"They send me word they come in two days," she replied.

"That'll be Friday, then," commented Jo Ann, who had caught the woman's words.

After they had finished choosing the pieces of pottery, they packed them in the back of the car.

"I'd like to know where José's going to sit now," observed Peggy as she crowded into the front seat with Jo Ann and Florence.

"He'll manage someway," Jo Ann smiled.

On reaching Pedro's store they found José waiting for them.

"Did you find the *rurales?*" Florence asked him.

"*Sí,* I find two. They have gone to the mine to get Luis. They say they do not need me to help."

"Good," Florence approved. "Now you can help me pack these *ollas* and vases."

After José had squeezed into the back seat and they were driving off, Peggy remarked to Florence, "What puzzles me is how are you going to get the pottery shipped after you get it packed? There's no railroad and no truck service here. Someone 'll have to take it to the city. How 're you going to get it to the city?"

"I thought we'd drive in ourselves if—if——"

"We can't let there be any ifs about it," broke in Jo Ann crisply. "We've got to get to the city tomorrow. I've got to get word to the mystery man to be on the lookout for the smugglers Friday."

"Couldn't you write to him?" Peggy asked.

"It wouldn't reach him in time. They take the mail in to the city every other day. I asked at the

store, and the mail's already been sent, and no more 'll be sent till Friday. That 'd be too late."

"But Miss Prudence 'll probably say 'nothing doing' when we tell her we want to drive to the city," persisted Peggy. "She said she didn't like riding in Jitters well enough to take another trip to the city soon."

"I heard her say yesterday that she had to have some more supplies—that she just couldn't keep house without a larger variety of food," Florence remarked. "She said we'd all be having scurvy and beri-beri and all sorts of diseases if we didn't have a greater variety."

Jo Ann smiled. "That sounds good to me—not the diseases, of course. We'll tell her we'll bring her a load of good eats—fresh fruits and vegetables and anything she asks for. I'm going to get word to the mystery man—or bust."

Both girls laughed, and Peggy added a moment later, "Puff out your cheeks and prepare to bust, Jo, 'cause Miss Prudence won't let you go."

"You underrate my persuasive powers, and you don't realize how tired she is of preparing the same menus, day after day. I heard her say the other day that about the only thing Pedro sold at his store was beans, beans, beans."

When they reached Jitters' House, José set to work at once to make a crate. The girls wrapped each piece of pottery with the paper they had brought for that purpose and carefully placed the smaller jars inside the larger ones. When the crate was finished, they packed excelsior around the jars and in every inch of space. That done, José carried the crate over to the house across the road, for safe-keeping.

With a wide smile Jo Ann remarked, "We'll have to get an early start tomorrow morning to take our crate to the city. We'll have to promise to make the trip there and back in one day, I know."

When they were riding horseback on the mountain trail, they met the *rurales* taking their prisoner to the village. The girls urged their

horses close to the cliff to allow room for them to pass on the narrow trail.

After they had gone by, Jo Ann said gravely, "I hope it won't be long till the smugglers are prison-bound, too. I believe this Luis was just their tool."

As soon as they had entered the house, the girls hunted up Miss Prudence, and Jo Ann told of their plan to take the pottery to the city the next day and get supplies for her.

Miss Prudence pursed up her lips thoughtfully and remained silent for some time before answering.

Jo Ann, with her usual impatience, could not stand this quiet and suspense and began talking about the necessity of a more varied diet. "We need more fruit and vegetables to have a balanced diet, don't you think? Our home economics teacher told us at school that it was absolutely necessary for us to get plenty of fruit, as most of it has vitamin B. It's that vitamin that makes our nerves normal and steady, she said."

Miss Prudence's lips relaxed into a whimsical smile. "Well, we certainly need our nerves steadied after last night's wild excitement." She grew grave again. "I believe that Luis was trying to kill Ed and you girls."

Jo Ann did not stop to argue this point but kept to the diet question. "If you'll make a list of the things you want, we'll have them here for you tomorrow evening."

"Before dark?"

"Yes."

"Well, I hesitate to give my consent. Maybe I'd better go with you—but, no. I feel as if I ought to stay and nurse Manuel. Maria has no more idea than a jay bird about how to take care of sick folks. Why, when I put some rolls of bandage in the hot oven to sterilize this morning, she looked at me as if she thought I was crazy!"

In spite of her hesitation, Jo Ann finally succeeded in persuading her to let them go to the city.

"If you set the alarm clock for four-thirty and

get up then, I believe you can make the trip in one day," she said as the girls were about to leave. "Take my clock to your room." She reached over to the near-by table, picked up her alarm clock, and set it to go off at that hour before handing it to Jo Ann.

It was hard for Jo Ann to keep from laughing, as she could see Florence's eyes twinkling, and Peggy holding her hand over her mouth to check her mirth.

At the first sound of the alarm the next morning, Jo Ann reached over and turned it off, then popped out of bed and began dressing. Florence rose almost as promptly, but it required much persuasion from both of them to get Peggy out of bed.

"I'm not keen on this trip anyway, since we won't get to stay in the city tonight and promenade on the Plaza," she grumbled drowsily as she sat on the edge of the bed, making no move to dress. "I'm not interested in seeing an old mystery man, as Jo Ann is."

"Only in handsome young Mexican ones," Jo Ann grinned. "Well, you may pass your smiling young Mexican on the street today."

"If I should, I'd look very romantic sitting in an old car packed with a huge crate, now, wouldn't I? He'd think I was bringing chickens or something to market."

Both girls laughed at Peggy's disgusted tone.

"That reminds me," Jo Ann added, "that we must go straight to the market as soon as we reach the city."

By the time they had dressed and had eaten a hurried breakfast, José was waiting for them with the horses. To their surprise he rode on up the trail with them.

"I didn't know you were going with us," Florence remarked to him.

"Miss Prudencia say I must take you to the village and go back for you this afternoon."

"That's good. It might be late this evening before we get back, but we're counting on getting back before dark."

As soon as they reached Jitters' House, they

changed their clothes while José was putting the pottery crate into their car.

"Jitters is a picture now," Peggy remarked on coming out to the car.

"You'll be sure to see your handsome young man today," teased Jo Ann.

So interested were the girls in their plans for the day, as they drove through the village, that Jo Ann for once forgot to look over at the pottery woman's shack till after she had reached Pedro's store. "Did either of you notice if the pottery was still piled up by the woman's house?" she asked.

Both shook their heads.

"I'm sure it must be still there. The woman seemed to be certain that the men weren't coming till tomorrow to get it. She said they'd sent her word this time."

As there was little travel on the road, Jo Ann was able to make good time. As usual, she had planned to let Florence drive when they neared the city.

"At the rate you're speeding, Jo," Florence

remarked finally, "we'll be in town before we realize it."

Jo Ann laughed. "Speeding in Jitters? Impossible. That old car in front of us isn't built for speeding, either. It's been keeping ahead at about the same distance for the last hour."

"So I've noticed," said Peggy. "It must be of the same year's vintage as Jitters."

"If she is, Jitters can beat her. I'm going to step on it and see if I can't gain on her." With that Jo Ann stepped on the gas, and soon their car was lessening the distance between it and the car ahead.

As they drew closer Jo Ann suddenly uttered an excited little cry.

"What's the matter?" queried Florence and Peggy together.

"That's the smugglers' car!"

"You're crazy, Jo!" ejaculated Peggy derisively.

"It can't be!" Florence cried.

"But it is! I'm positive it is."

"You're just guessing," retorted Peggy. "You can't tell from here."

"I'm going to pass that car, and you look hard, Florence, and see if those men aren't the smugglers and if it isn't piled full of pottery."

"Oh, don't, Jo," begged Peggy, now beginning to be afraid that Jo Ann might be right. "Don't try to pass it."

CHAPTER XIX

AN EXCITING RACE

WITH A WARNING HONK of her horn Jo Ann sped up and started to pass the other car.

Almost simultaneously one of the men turned and stared incredulously, then shouted out a sharp order. The next instant the other man swerved his car dangerously toward them, trying to force them off into a deep ditch.

"Oh, step on it!" cried Peggy. "Step on it!"

"They're trying to hit us!" shrieked Florence.

Somewhere from the back of Jo Ann's mind came the command, "Keep your head!"

Automatically her nerves and muscles obeyed. She turned her car sharply and swiftly out toward the ditch as close as she dared, giving it all the gas that it would take.

For a perilous moment that seemed ages-long

to the girls the car hovered near the edge of the bank. Instinctively both Florence and Peggy leaned to the other side of the car, as if to make their weight the deciding factor in keeping the car from falling into the ditch.

Then, to their unbounded relief, their car swept by, missing the other by a few inches.

"A miracle!" gasped Peggy.

"Keep stepping on it!" implored Peggy as she turned to look back at the smugglers' car. "They're coming full tilt after us."

"O-oh, hear them yelling at us!" put in Florence, her eyes dilated with fright. "They're trying to catch us. Step on it! Suppose they should shoot at us—or our tires!"

Though Jo Ann heard the girls' earnest pleas, she wasted no energy in replying. Every cell in her brain must be centered on driving. That car was still dangerously near. They might push past and try that same trick of forcing her into the ditch on the other side. Moreover, the road ahead was much steeper and narrower. It wound

threadlike up the mountain side. What if those smugglers should deliberately wait and force them off that high road! To be knocked off that steep rocky cliff would mean death for all of them. And what if her engine should go bad up there—or a tire blow out! "Steady, Jo," she ordered herself. "Stop worrying and concentrate on driving."

"They're not gaining an inch," Florence called out encouragingly then.

"But they're not losing any," added Peggy.

When, in spite of her determination not to worry, she had to slow down at turns in the winding road, she found her breath coming more and more quickly. Perhaps the smugglers could make the turns faster.

Again and again Florence encouraged her with, "They're not gaining."

Finally, when they were nearing the highest stretch of all, Florence exclaimed, "They're dropping behind a little now! See, Peg!"

"Hot ziggity! They are, sure enough!" cried

Peggy, vastly relieved. "I believe the worst's over. But don't slow down, Jo."

"I won't any more than I have to," Jo Ann replied, cheered immensely by the girls' assurance that the smugglers were dropping behind in the race.

"Good old Jo—and good old Jitters," praised Florence. "They can't be beaten."

"Don't brag too soon," Jo Ann found time to say in short, clipped sentences.

She was determined to keep Jitters running at the greatest speed possible and yet not be reckless in making the many sharp curves. With mind and eyes ever alert, she watched the road. She must be ready for any emergency.

Florence and Peggy kept turning every minute or two to watch the pursuing car.

"It's losing ground right along," Peggy kept saying, ending each time with, "isn't it, Florence?"

Each time, to Jo Ann's joy, Florence would reply with an emphatic "Yes."

Still Jo Ann held to the maximum speed possible for safety. "Nothing like being on the safe side," she told herself. "They might gain on us on the down grade."

After they were on the downward stretch, both girls assured her that they believed the danger was over. "They'll never catch us now unless we have engine or tire trouble."

A few minutes later, on glancing back, Peggy exclaimed triumphantly, "They've about stopped! They've stopped now! On that highest curve. One of them's getting out now. Maybe they have a flat."

"Here's hoping they have two flats," smiled Florence.

"Why not wish for three, for good measure?" added Jo Ann.

"Say, aren't you thankful Miss Prudence isn't along?" Peggy asked suddenly.

Both girls smiled, and Peggy went on, "She'd have had heart failure or something by this time."

"No, she wouldn't," declared Jo Ann. "She'd have rallied to the cause and encouraged me on, as you two did. When it comes to the test, she's strong for action and plenty of it."

A few minutes later Florence announced that it would not be long till they would reach the city. "Do you think we'd better change, Jo, and let me take the wheel?"

Jo Ann shook her head. "I don't want to stop even long enough for that."

"Oh, no, don't change," begged Peggy, immediately disturbed at the idea of stopping.

"I know the shortest way to the market now, and that's where we want to go first," Jo Ann declared. "I've got to find the mystery man at once, so he can get on the smugglers' trail."

"It won't be easy for him to follow them even then," Peggy said thoughtfully. "Can't they go around the city some way?"

"No, that's the only road till they get to the edge of the city," replied Florence. "They'll probably not come up into the main part."

"I imagine the mystery man 'll phone or telegraph to the officers on both sides of the border to be on the lookout," put in Jo Ann. "They could catch more of the gang that way."

When Jo Ann turned into the street leading to the market, Florence remarked, "It 'll be no use trying to find a parking place in front of the market. It's always full. You'll save time by parking in the first empty place you find within a reasonable distance. I've wasted as much as half an hour hunting for a parking place down here."

"We mustn't waste any time anyway," Peggy put in. "We have lots of things to buy for Miss Prudence, and I've a little shopping I want to do, too. We can be doing our buying while Jo hunts up her mystery man."

At quite a little distance from the market Jo Ann found a parking place. No sooner had she stopped the car than she sprang out, saying, "I'll meet you at that same booth in front, where we waited the other day."

Off she rushed down the street, her fast-flying steps causing more than one Mexican to say smilingly, *"Americana."*

When Peggy tried to lock the car a few moments later, she found that she couldn't. "Something's gone wrong with it," she said, handing the key to Florence. "See if you can make it work."

After several unsuccessful efforts Florence slipped the keys into her purse, saying, "Oh, let's don't worry any more about trying to lock it. We can get a boy to watch the car for us." Hardly had she finished speaking than she caught a glimpse of the newsboy with whom Carlitos had been so friendly. "Here's the very boy!" she exclaimed, gesturing to him to come to her.

The boy's large black eyes lit in swift recognition, and he ran over to her side.

Florence quickly explained to him that she wanted him to watch the car while she went to the market.

With a nod of assent the boy answered, smiling, "*Sí*. I watch good for you. You are Carlitos's friend."

"He'll watch it right; we won't have to worry," Florence said confidently as she and Peggy walked on down to the market.

Soon they were busily buying fruit and vegetables.

In the meantime Jo Ann had elbowed her way through the crowded aisles of the market to the pottery booth at the back. On reaching the booth she stared around, anxious-eyed, hunting for the mystery man. Oh, where was he? There wasn't a sign of him anywhere. He'd said he was always around here at this time of day. What if he should 've missed coming this day?

She walked slowly back of the booth and on around to the front again, her eyes scanning every man in sight. "He's not here," she told herself finally, "and I don't know where else to go to look for him. Oh dear! The smugglers 'll get away again."

Just as she had reached this discouraging conclusion a stalwart, olive-skinned man with a dark mustache and black hat stepped up to her side and said in a low tone, "Don't show your surprise—I'm the man you're looking for."

The mystery man! Jo Ann barely suppressed a gasp of amazement. Disguised as a Mexican. The same aquiline nose and gray eyes, but how startlingly different he looked.

In almost an inaudible voice she told him as quickly as she could about the smugglers being on the way to the city.

The man's eyes shone on hearing this news. "Good work. We'll follow them this time and try to get the ringleaders of the gang as well as those two. I must get word to my men right away on both sides. You're still at the La Esperanza Mine?"

"Yes."

"I'll let you know how I come out. Many thanks for your help." With that the man rushed off toward a side exit.

Feeling relieved and happy that she had succeeded in delivering this message, Jo Ann walked on to the front to look for the girls and found them, as she had thought she would, buying fruit and vegetables.

Peggy was the first to spy her. "You don't have to tell us you've had success, Jo," she said. "You're smiling from ear to ear."

"I didn't mean to be that jubilant."

"You have a right to be happy," Florence said warmly. "Peg and I are glad, too, aren't we?"

"Sure."

While Peggy and Florence selected the fruit and vegetables, Jo Ann made the other purchases, chiefly by means of the sign language, as her Spanish was not sufficient for bargaining. As soon as they had all finished their buying, Florence found two small Mexican boys to carry their piles of packages to the car. With the boys at their heels they started out to the street, Florence in the lead.

Just as she stepped out on the street, Florence

caught sight of the newsboy, his face and head bleeding, almost surrounded by a crowd of people.

"Gracious! What can have happened to the poor child?" she gasped as she ran toward him.

As soon as he saw Florence the newsboy began explaining between sobs, "Oh, señorita, two men —stole—your car! I try to stop them—and one of them—knock me down."

"Oh, that is terrible!" Florence cried, at the same time scrutinizing his wounds. "Not deep, but painful," she decided before going on to question him about the appearance of the men.

Brokenly, the boy began describing the man who had hit him. "He had a scar—on his chin —and one eye squinted—an evil eye."

"That sounds like the taller one of the smugglers," Florence decided immediately. "Was he the taller one of the two men?" she asked.

"*Sí.* I try to keep them—from stealing your car, but——" The boy stopped talking to sob afresh.

"I'm sure you tried," Florence comforted him. "Here is some money." She handed him some coins and then a clean handkerchief, adding, "Wipe the blood with this."

A tall professional-looking man stepped up just then and remarked, "I will look after the boy."

With a *"Muchas gracias"* and an *"Adios"* to the boy, Florence hurried back to Jo Ann and Peggy, who were standing near by, still wondering what had happened.

CHAPTER XX

MORE TROUBLES

As soon as she drew near, Florence burst out excitedly, "Our car's stolen!"

Jo Ann's and Peggy's eyes stretched to their widest, and their lower jaws dropped.

Jo Ann was the first to recover from the shock. "Our car's stolen! Why, who could 've—— Oh, it must 've been the smugglers!"

"I'm sure it was," Florence replied. "The newsboy described one of them exactly—the taller one."

Peggy gasped audibly. "That settles it, then."

"He hit the boy—knocked him down—then they drove off in our car."

"I don't understand why the smuggler should 've hit the boy," put in Jo Ann bewil-

deredly. "What 'd the boy have to do with the affair?"

Florence and Peggy exchanged glances, then Florence answered, "I hired the boy to watch our car while we went to the market. The lock on the car wouldn't work. I'm to blame."

"Oh—I'm beginning to see now." The bewildered expression on Jo Ann's face slipped away, and a look of determination took its place. "We've got to get our car back right away." She drew her brows together into a little frowning line of concentration.

"Hadn't we better report it to the police?" Peggy asked.

Jo Ann shook her head. "Not yet. Maybe later. I believe we'd better hunt up the mystery man and tell——" She halted abruptly. "But maybe he's left the city already. I hope not. I want to tell him our car's license number, so he can follow it—especially since the smugglers might 've discarded their car entirely. But maybe one of them might drive ours and the other

one their car. Come on. We'll plan what to do as we walk." She caught Florence with one hand and Peggy with the other.

"But where 're we going?" queried Peggy.

"Anywhere so we can get away from this crowd," Florence whispered, eying the curious onlookers, who were waiting to see what the *Americanas* were going to do.

No sooner had the girls started off down the street than Florence remembered about the two little boys carrying their packages. She glanced around and saw them following close behind, the packages piled up in their arms almost as high as their chins. "Gracious!" she exclaimed. "We can't have them following us everywhere. We'd better have them take the packages back to the market and leave them there for a while. Walk slowly, and I'll catch up with you in a shake."

She wheeled about, gave a quick order in Spanish to the boys, and then accompanied them to the market. After leaving the packages

at the same booth where they had waited before and paying the boys a few *centavos,* she flew back to the girls.

"I've decided to go to the telephone exchange first," Jo Ann announced to her quickly. "Where is it?"

"One block down, then turn to the right and go about a block and a half."

"Let's step on it." Jo Ann strode off in what Peggy always called her "long-legged gallop," which meant that both she and Florence had to take two or three steps to Jo Ann's one.

Having caught up with Jo Ann by running, Florence asked, "Why—are you—going to the exchange?"

" 'Cause I feel sure that he was going to do some long-distance phoning—and he started off in this direction." With that she galloped off faster than ever.

"People 'll think we're crazy—running—along like this," puffed Peggy.

Florence nodded assent. "They're saying, 'Ah, those—queer *Americanas!*'"

The two girls reached the exchange at last in time for Florence to help Jo Ann question one of the operators. The man they had described, the operator replied, had left only a few minutes before.

"Where did he go?" Jo Ann asked quickly.

The operator shook her head. "That I do not know."

"Now where?" Peggy asked Jo Ann curiously.

"To the telegraph office. He'd probably have to telegraph, too, to some of the inspectors. Where's the telegraph office, Florence?"

"Go back to the corner where we just turned. It's a block past the market."

"Oh, gosh!" Jo Ann exploded. "Just my luck to go to the wrong place first. Come on."

Off she rushed out of the building and soon was several yards ahead of the other two. By the

time she had reached the telegraph office, she was panting, her cheeks a brilliant scarlet with beads of perspiration running down them.

Just as she dashed in, she bumped into a man hurrying out.

"Oh—I—beg your——" she began, then gasped, "Oh, it's *you!* I've—been hunting—for you!"

"What's happened?" the mystery man asked, guiding her outside, away from the curious stare of the people in the office.

As quickly as she could manage in her breathless state, she recounted what had happened.

"Glad you found me in time," he replied. "I was just ready to leave in pursuit. What's your car's number?" He jerked out a notebook from his pocket and jotted down the number she gave him. "I'll try to get your car back to you," he added then. "About your getting home this afternoon——"

He broke off in the middle of his sentence and turned to the tall, erect Mexican man standing

back of him, whom Jo Ann now noticed for the first time. "Gonzales, I want you to drive this girl and her friends to their home out beyond San Geronimo. She'll tell you how to get there, if you don't know." He turned again to Jo Ann, saying, "This is Juan Gonzales, my right-hand man; Gonzales, this is my right-hand girl, Miss Jo Ann Cutrer. Take good care of her." He addressed Jo Ann again: "He's a careful driver. I'll write to you as soon as I can." With an "Adios" he hurried on to the curb, sprang into a tan roadster, and drove off rapidly.

By that time Peggy and Florence had come puffing up, and after introducting Mr. Gonzales to them, Jo Ann explained that he was to drive them home. Florence, with her knowledge of Mexicans and their language, talked for a few minutes in Spanish with the stranger before agreeing to this plan. Having decided that he was a gentleman and trustworthy, she told Jo Ann that she, for one, thought they ought to be starting back home shortly. "As soon as we get

our packages at the market, we'll be ready, won't we?"

"I have a few things I'd like to get," spoke up Peggy.

"How long will it take you to finish your shopping?" Mr. Gonzales asked in excellent English, surprising them all so that there was a moment's silence before Peggy answered, "I'll be ready in about fifteen or twenty minutes. You girls will be too, won't you?"

Both nodded assent.

"Very well, I'll have Mr. Andrews's other car here waiting by that time for you."

"Mr. Andrews's car?" Jo Ann repeated puzzledly, then smiled. "You mean the mystery man's car. We've called him the mystery man so long that I'd forgotten for the moment that he'd told me his name was Andrews. I'll try to remember that hereafter."

The girls hurried off to finish their shopping and in about a quarter of an hour were back at

the corner. Almost at the same minute Mr. Gonzales drove up in a sedan, and the girls climbed into the back seat, piling their packages on the floor.

Jo Ann noted with satisfaction that Mr. Gonzales was a careful driver, weaving in and out the traffic with ease and taking no unnecessary risks. Having arrived at this conclusion she relaxed somewhat and began talking over their exciting experiences with the girls. "One thing I'm thankful for is that we three paid for Jitters ourselves," she remarked. "Wouldn't it be terrible if, say, Miss Prudence, had been a part owner? Wouldn't you hate to tell her about the car's having been stolen?"

Both nodded emphatically, and Florence added, "I've been wondering if we'd better tell her. I rather think not. She'd get all stirred up over it, and besides, the mystery man 'll probably get Jitters back to us in a few days. How about keeping quiet about it for a while?"

"I'm in favor of keeping mum till we hear from Mr. Andrews," Peggy put in. "If he writes he couldn't find the car, why, of course, we'll have to tell Miss Prudence and Mr. Eldridge then."

"When José meets us at Jitters' House this afternoon," Jo Ann broke in, "he'll know something's wrong at once. He'll want to know what's become of Jitters."

"We'll tell him the truth and ask him to say nothing about it for a few days—till we tell him he may," Florence suggested. "He already knows about those men being angry at us for getting the pottery they'd planned to buy. That reminds me, I feel mighty bad about losing that pottery. I'd written my friend I was shipping it, and she'll be expecting it."

"Mr. Andrews may recover it when—or if—he finds our car," Peggy remarked.

"I certainly hope he recovers both the car and the pottery," Jo Ann said with a sigh. "When I think of that gang of smugglers he's fighting—

well, I just get scared stiff. I'm afraid they're going to kill him before it's all over."

"Let's try not to worry," advised Florence.

When they finally reached Jitters' House, they found José waiting for them with the horses. His black eyes widened in surprise on seeing them getting out of a strange car.

After the girls had thanked Mr. Gonzales and he had started off toward the city, Florence told the mystified José what had happened, ending, "Do not tell anyone about the car's having been stolen."

"I will not tell," he promised.

The next day Jo Ann worried about the mystery man until Peggy said, "Snap out of the dumps. Miss Prudence is bringing her tonic."

And then Miss Prudence did enter the room, carrying a bottle. "You girls don't seem to know what to do with yourselves this morning," she said, "so I've decided to give you some extra work—polishing the furniture."

CHAPTER XXI

WELCOME GUESTS

THE NEXT MORNING the girls waited anxiously for José to return from his trip to the village. But when the family sat down to eat their lunch, he had not yet returned. Noticing that Carlitos was not at the table, Peggy inquired about him.

"He went with José after the mail," said Miss Prudence.

Then the boy burst into the room. With his Spanish words tumbling over each other in his haste, he blurted out, "Ah, señoritas, your automobile—it is stolen. Terrible!"

"Carlitos," ordered Miss Prudence, "speak English. What's happened?"

In halting English Carlitos repeated that the girls' car had been stolen.

"Stolen!" ejaculated Miss Prudence.

"The car was stolen when we were in the city," said Jo Ann.

"My stars!" Miss Prudence gasped.

"Don't get flustered, Prue," Mr. Eldridge advised. Then he looked at Jo Ann. "Tell us exactly what happened. Florence, you and Peggy put in the details she misses."

With only a few exclamations and gasps from Miss Prudence to interrupt, the story was told.

Finally satisfied that he had heard all the details, Mr. Eldridge said: "I'm glad it's all turned out as it has—so far. But hereafter don't get tangled up with smugglers."

So earnest and emphatic had Mr. Eldridge been that for the first time Jo Ann realized fully the risks she had been running. "I'm through with smugglers and their affairs from now on," she declared. "I was more to blame for getting mixed up in this than Peggy and Florence. They'd have kept out of it if it hadn't been for me."

Florence spoke up promptly and began try-

ing to share the blame, but Jo Ann shook her head. "No, I'm the guilty one."

After this well-deserved lecture Jo Ann felt "indigo blue," as she expressed it to the girls afterward. "If I could only hear from Mr. Andrews that he's all right and that the smugglers were caught and the car found!"

The next day dragged on interminably, so it seemed to Jo Ann in her low state of mind.

"Oh, cheer up, Jo," Peggy finally begged. "You're going to get good news tomorrow, I feel it in my bones."

"I hope your bones 're trustworthy," Jo Ann returned; "but I have my doubts about their power to prophesy."

On the morning of the fourth day Jo Ann woke in a more cheerful mood. "I believe we're going to hear from Mr. Andrews today," she told the girls.

Peggy smiled. "Your bones must be getting prophetic, too."

When José appeared at noon with a letter

from Mr. Andrews, Peggy and Florence were quite as excited as Jo Ann.

"Hurry up!" Peggy implored, as Jo Ann began to open it.

"Read it out loud—hurry!" urged Florence.

In another moment Jo Ann had unfolded the letter. "Why, it has only three lines in it! It just says, 'All is well. Am bringing your car Saturday afternoon to San Geronimo. Hope to get there by four o'clock.' "

Jo Ann's face was beaming by this time. "Just think! He's all right—and so's Jitters!"

"Gr-and!" chimed in Peggy, catching Jo Ann and Florence by the hands and circling about in lively dancing steps.

While they were still whirling about, Miss Prudence entered the room.

Jo Ann checked her fast-flying feet and sang out, "We've swell, elegant news! The mystery man's alive, and he's bringing our car to the village this afternoon—about four o'clock."

"Well, I'm certainly glad to hear that!" Miss

Prudence exclaimed. "Let's see—if he reaches the village that late, he'll probably come on out here. We must have a good dinner for him. That's fine of him, bringing your car all that distance. Suppose you girls come to the kitchen and help me awhile. I'll see that he gets some good New England cooking."

Jo Ann grinned. "That lets us girls out. We're from the South."

Miss Prudence came back promptly with, "You're all good help just the same. Come along."

The three girls followed her to the kitchen and were soon busy helping her prepare the salad and dessert. So diligently did they work that they had finished before it was time for José to go to the village with the horses for the two men to ride.

"Let's go with José," Jo Ann suggested.

"All right," agreed Peggy and Florence.

All three hurried off at once to change into their riding outfits.

When, about two hours later, they came in sight of Pedro's store, Jo Ann's sharp eyes spied two cars in front of the building. "One of the cars is a brand-new one. A beauty."

"Maybe it's Mr. Andrews's," Peggy suggested.

"That other one's his, I know. I wonder where he's parked Jitters. I don't see her."

"I hope nothing has happened to her," put in Florence.

With their faces lit by the broadest smiles, the three sprang from their horses and greeted Mr. Andrews, who had hurried out to meet them, Mr. Gonzales following closely behind him.

"Oh, we're so happy you're safe and sound—that you're both all right!" Jo Ann welcomed them.

"We certainly are, too, aren't we?" added Peggy.

Florence nodded. "Yes, indeed."

"Did you capture the smugglers—all of

them?" Jo Ann asked eagerly in the next breath.

Mr. Andrews smiled. "Not all of them; but the three ringleaders and the two whose trail you set me following are behind prison bars. That gang's broken to bits; I can breathe more freely now. If it hadn't been for you, I might be dead. I'm certainly grateful to you."

Jo Ann drew a long sigh of relief, as did the other two girls. "That certainly is grand news," she added the next moment.

"I hope that's the last experience you girls 'll ever have of that kind," he said earnestly.

A moment's silence fell; then Jo Ann asked, "Where's Jitters?" Suddenly recalling that neither man knew the name of their car, she added, smiling, "Our old Ford, I mean."

The two men exchanged smiles before Mr. Andrews answered, "Jitters is a complete wreck —in a deep gully near the border."

A look of utter bewilderment appeared on the face of each girl.

In another moment Jo Ann recovered suf-

ficiently to say haltingly, "But—you wrote—you were bringing our car."

"I did bring it. There it is!" Mr. Andrews gestured to the shining new car. "It's a present for the assistance you girls have given us—to take the place of your Jitters."

Three pairs of eyes flew open to their widest. So overwhelming was their amazement that for once none of them could speak for a full minute.

"You have done much for us," Mr. Gonzales spoke up, smiling. "You have probably saved my life as well as Mr. Andrews's. *Muchas gracias.*"

"But—but, Mr. Andrews—Mr. Gonzales," began Jo Ann confusedly. "We do not deserve this fine new car. You must not give us such a——"

"You have more than earned it," smiled Mr. Andrews. "It is yours by rights. We owe you more than we can ever repay you."

Convinced at last that the car was rightfully theirs, the girls began to exclaim delightedly:

"Grand!"

"Gorgeous!"

"Wonderful!"

"A thousand thanks from each one of us," added Jo Ann, shining-eyed.

With that the three of one accord ran over to the car to inspect it and revel in its beauty.

"We'll feel so elegant—so swanky, riding about in this car!" exclaimed Jo Ann.

They climbed inside then to admire the upholstery and shining gadgets.

A few minutes later Jo Ann was proudly driving out of the village, the two men following in the other car, and José with the aid of a small boy bringing along the horses.

"Won't Miss Prudence and Mr. Eldridge be surprised when they hear about our new car?" Peggy remarked.

Jo Ann smiled broadly. "Miss Prudence was always scared of Jitters. She'll be delighted."

"What shall we name it?" Florence asked a moment later.

Peggy suddenly chuckled. "How about naming it for Miss Prudence? It's so shining and spotlessly clean. And besides, that name might help Jo to be more prudent—less reckless."

"That name suits me," laughed Jo Ann.

"And me," added Florence. "And I believe it 'll please Miss Prudence, especially when we explain why we've chosen the name."